10¢

MAY

RANGELAND ROMANCES

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

TWO COMPLETE WESTERN LOVE NOVELS

LOVE WAITS AT RAIL'S END
by JOHN PAUL JONES

LITTLE QUEEN OF HEARTBREAK MINE
by RUBY LAVERTE THOMSON

THE SEÑORITA FIGHTS FOR CUPID!
A ROMANTIC RANGELAND NOVELETTE
by ERIC THANE

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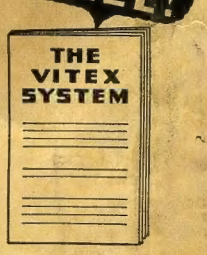

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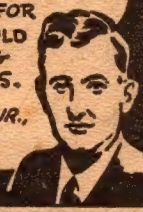

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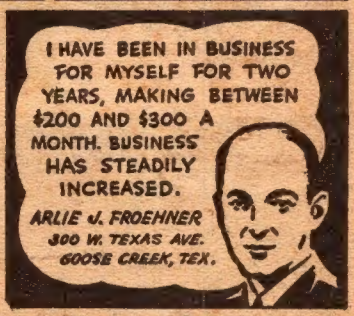

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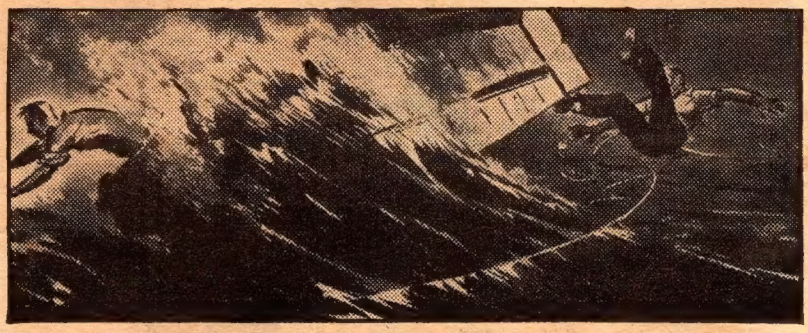

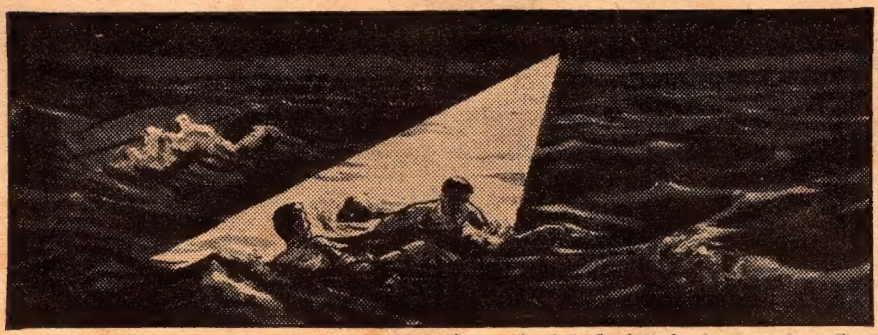

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10¢ RANGELAND ROMANCES

Volume Fifteen | May, 1940 | Number Four

Two Complete Western Love Novels

LITTLE QUEEN OF HEARTBREAK MINE..**Ruby La Verte Thomson** 6
The glorious promise of a lover's lips brought comfort and courage to orphaned Rita's grief-torn heart. . . . But when they spoke the name of the other girl, who was to be his bride, she needed a strength greater than courage to make her dream of Paradise come true!

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Corn pone or "heavenly cabbage" or vegetable stew—it's all in knowing how. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS

Published monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter April 19, 1937, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1940, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.20 Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in the U.S.A.

TWO LOVES FOR LINDA

A WEEK ago, here in the moonlight, Joel Reed had seen Linda in the arms of another man—Bard Cordell, the outlaw. It had seemed right to Linda, then, that she should give her kisses to reckless, red-headed Bard. But now, after a week in Sun-Dance, she knew it had been wrong. It had been wrong to break her promise to Uncle Doc, even though her fingers had been crossed when she made the promise not to meet Bard. And it had been wrong to hurt Joel Reed.

Linda stood in the shadows of a lilac bush when Joel turned in at the gate. For a long moment she had time to watch him, to see the bony strength of him, the proud way his head sat upon his shoulders. Moonlight gleamed on his fair hair, and seemed to pool in golden lights in the gray eyes. The golden light seemed to spread over his whole face—as if a sudden candleflame had been lifted near it—when she spoke his name, softly, from the shadows.

"Joel—Joel, please!"

She took a step forward, then, and stood there facing him, a slender figure in a blue muslin dress, with her dark hair a wealth of curls over her shoulders. Moonlight shone on the creamy oval of her face, the tender quivering mouth with the dimple at the corner, the luminous eyes, with the dark lashes curling from them, thick and soft and silken. Her two hands fluttered toward him, like timid white birds. "Joel!"

"Linda!" And then there was no more space between them. For Joel's arms were locked about her, drawing her close.

Her arms went up around his neck with fierce tenderness. She was filled with a warm, sweet rush of rapturous emotion. She was held by a yearning as deep and overwhelming as the sea, as his kiss reached down and drew every pulse-beat from her small, throbbing body.

The moon seemed to stand still in a breathless hush; even the stars ceased to twinkle. The earth was stilled. There was only the pound of Linda's heart, the leaping of her blood through mad pulses . . . the flaming of the fire within her, that was burning away all familiar things.

"Linda! Linda!" Joel said breathlessly. "You do love me! You do!"

"Joel, I can't explain," she said, brokenly. "It's—it's as if I were terribly wicked . . . and loved you and Bard both; both, yet differently. When I'm with you, Joel, then all the other life seems wrong, false. But when I'm with Bard . . . then the old days come back, and I don't know what to do. Oh, Joel!" Her arms tightened about his neck, and she hid her face against his shoulder. Her body was quivering. "What can I do? How can I know?"

Joel's voice seemed to come from a distance. It was weary, dulled. "I don't know how . . . but you've got to know for sure, honey. I reckon I understand about thinkin' you love us both.

"You see, Linda,"—he spoke quietly, and the strength of his voice helped to stop her trembling—"sometimes folks fall in love, and sometimes they fall in love with love. I reckon it's that way. You really love one of us—Bard Cordell or me. The other . . . well, you're just in love with the idea.

"Maybe it's what we stand for that you love, instead of us. Maybe, with me, you just see a chance for a home, for peace—and that's what you think you love, while he's the real one. Or it may be the other way around. You see, darling,"—his hand stroked the dark hair back from her forehead—"I've been doin' a heap of thinkin' while I was drivin' the stage around, this last week."

"I thought—you were never coming back!" There was a little catch in her voice. "And I—I wanted you, Joel!"

He smiled; the slow, thoughtful smile that lighted his whole face. "I had to come back, honey. First of all, I had to ask you to forgive me for losin' my head and ridin' away in anger."

"No, Joel. . . . Oh, you were right! I know it, now!"

"I had no need to hurt you," he said. "But seein' you in that other man's arms —seein' him kiss you—well, it drove me loco, honey! But I've fought it all out, Linda. You couldn't help doin' that. . . And I love you, just the way you are!"

"And I love you, Joel! Oh, I do!"

"I know, dearest," he said gently, and his face was grave again. "There's something else I've got to tell you, Linda."

"What, Joel?" she said quickly.

"It's about Bard Cordell. He's been recognized. You see, he's been playin' every night at Fancy Black's game room —a reckless, fool thing to do."

"He promised me he'd leave Sun-Dance!" Linda whispered. "But his luck was probably running, and he couldn't stay away. It's like Bard. . ." She was thinking that Bard must have crossed his fingers when he made that promise to her. "What will they do to him, Joel?"

"I don't know. But you'd better tell him to go, Linda. I'll go in and talk with Old Doc, keep him from suspectin' what you're up to—while you go over there and warn him."

"You'd do that, Joel? You'd help Bard get away?" Her love for Joel seemed a pulsing thing in this moment. Yet, along with it, pulsed a fear for lovable, red-haired Bard, whose liberty, even life, was at stake—for Bard would fight if they tried to arrest him. "You're so good!"

"No, sweetheart. It's just—you've got to have every chance to be sure about this love business," he told her. . . .

The poignant story of how love revealed itself to Linda, true and unmistakeable and stripped of deceit, and how she met its brave, glorious challenge, will be told next month by Isabel Stewart Way, in her latest Sun-Dance novelette: "Fingers Crossed—In Love". . . one of five novelettes that will be published in June *Rangeland Romances!*

THE EDITOR.

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By Ruby La Verte Thomson

"Gary!" Rita's rich voice throbbed with pain. "Gary! This has to be goodbye! We can't see each other, ever again!"

LITTLE QUEEN OF HEARTBREAK MINE

A stirring novel of poignant western love

CHAPTER ONE

Thou Shalt Not Love

THERE was nothing sad about the passing of Angus McCune. His life had been a full one. For twenty years he had ruled as cattle baron of the valley; now he was penniless, and very tired. He wanted to go.

"It's best this way," he told the young girl who knelt by his bed, while one gnarled hand came up to rest gently upon her dark, shining curls. "I'll not be seein' their sly grins, Rita, lass." He chuckled feebly, as if he had a joke on his neighbors. "I can thumb my nose at the passel of 'em, in the Beyond . . . for not one'll know I died a pauper!"

Beneath the creek-bank willows, soft silver in the rangeland moonlight, a lover's warm lips brought comfort and courage to Rita's grief-torn heart. . . . Then they spoke the name of the other girl, who would be his bride—while Rita must seek forgetfulness from the eternal mockery of her sweet, brief memory of forbidden Paradise!

Rita's smile at her father was a lovely, luminous thing. She didn't see anything irreverent in his last words. All she could remember was the goodness of him, the tenderness. She must hold in the tears that were tearing jagged edges in her heart. Angus had never liked tears. He had taught her to hold her radiant head high and smile, when she wanted most to cry, so she was doing that now.

"No one will ever know, Dad," she assured him. "The bank found a buyer, and the price just canceled our debts. Folks will only think you sold out and got a mint of money."

His rugged brows drew a bit together. His eyes—midnight blue, like Rita's own—were troubled. "I'd dreamed of leavin' ye princess of this valley, lass! 'Twas a good dream—"

"Ho! Who wants to be a princess?" she scoffed, but her mouth, so exquisitely chiseled, trembled a little. "I'd lots rather be just me! And you've fixed everything Dad! You're giving me over to Matt Gale, and he'll go right on spoiling me, just as you've always done. And Matt lives so far away nobody will ever find out our secret. And, Dad . . . life has been such fun, being your girl!"

"Ye're a bonny lass . . . like yer mother, darlin'," Angus husked. Then: "Read me Matt's letter again, pet. The finest in all creation is Matt. He'll be a real father to you."

Rita brought the letter, worn from much reading, and read it once more, in her low, rich voice. A poignant letter it was, filled with the deep affection that had lasted since boyhood between these two men.

"You old Siwash," Rita read aloud. "What right you got to curl up like a sick steer and bawl about dying? You tough old brush-popper, I know you better than than. You're going to live—and lick hell out of this cattle game yet, and you know it.

"As for Rita—I've always felt that she was my girl, as well as yours. I'll always feel that way. My home is her home, shared only by my nephew, who is all the flesh-and-blood I have in the world.

"Gary is down your way, now; went to transfer some stock in one of our mines. I've written him to visit you, and bundle the two of you out to me. The two of you, mind you. For you needn't be mulish about shuffling off, Angus. I'm needing you.

Matt."

For a long moment there was silence. Rita felt the warm unshed tears against her eyelids, blinked them back, and her sweet mouth was tender as she smiled.

"A good friend," she said softly.

"The best," Angus nodded. "I can go, content, and take up my abode with the only lass that's prettier than you, pet. The Rita I married—when Matt wanted her. She loved me, though God knows Matt was the better man."

"No one could be better than you, Dad!" Her blue eyes were dark and shining with the badge of courage. "You've been good, always!"

He chuckled again. "Mind the time I made you give up that curly-haired miner, Jode Cannon? He'd coaxed you to run off with him, the devil. And you but a babe! I caught up with the two of you, and cuffed the seat of his pants. You cried, darlin'. Mebby I never told you how it hurt me . . . to break your heart, that time."

"Dad—Dad!" It was a soft little cry. "You were so right to save me! Why, I was only fifteen! I didn't know what love was. I don't even know, now. You're all I have—all I want!"

"Ye'll be wantin' more, lass. Love'll come sometime . . . a good, lastin' love. Who knows? Mebby this nephew of Matt's. . . ." He smiled, sighed gently. "I'm tired, pet . . . and I hear my first lass a-callin'. See you at sun-up, darlin'!"

IT SEEMED fitting that Gary Gale should walk in at that moment when old Angus died. Gary, who had grown from a gangling boy to a tall, well-muscled man, but whose brown eyes were just as Rita remembered them—dark, yet with golden fires ablaze in their depths. And his auburn hair was as thick and tousled as she'd known it would be.

There was pity in Gary's eyes as he came quietly up beside her and looked down at the peaceful, strong-lined face of Angus McCune. And, as naturally as a storm-tossed dove seeks shelter, Rita turned to Gary for help.

His arms closed about her, and a sense of comfort stole over her—blessed comfort. She felt as if she had been groping in the dark for a long, long time; cold, shivering, terribly alone. And now she wasn't alone any longer. Someone was there, guiding her into the light. Through the pain that pulsed with every breath, she was conscious of a strange, golden warmth that suffused her . . . of a new sweetness in her heart.

"Cry it out, dear!" Gary's voice was deep and low, rich with sympathy. "You'll feel better then."

It was good to cry in Gary's understanding arms; the tears had been bottled for so long. She had even forced laughter to her numbed lips when Angus joked about his dying; she had answered him lightly, because he wanted it so. But now the tears spilled forth, and Gary held her close. He even picked her up in his arms, walked over to her father's rocking chair and held her there for a while.

And Gary talked. He told her beautiful things about Angus; things he had learned from his uncle.

"You've got so much to hold fast to, Rita," he said. "Your memories of his fineness, his bravery. Uncle Matt has told me about him until I reckon I knew him as well as any man in the world . . . and admire him as I do Uncle Matt, himself."

Gary's voice went on, like the notes of a sweet, new song, until Rita's first grief was spent. Then again his strong arms lifted her gently, carried her into the next room, put her down on the sofa . . . . carefully, as if her slim, young body were a precious burden he could not bear to relinquish.

He pushed the dusky curls back from her sweet, heart-shaped face, looked into her tear-wet eyes.

"Rita, darlin', stay here for a while," he said gently. "Leave everything to me. And remember, he'd want you to be glad —with him! Will you try to do that, dear?"

"Yes," she whispered, and put one hand to her slim pulsing throat. "Yes, Gary."

Then again his arms closed about her, and this time his lips came down to hers.

There was gentleness in Gary's kiss, but there was fire, too. And suddenly the flame of his lips poured through her like a blaze of glory. For an instant she was still. Her soft lips surrendered shyly to the sweetness of his, and it was as if life had struck rich, deep chords of enduring beauty in the woman's heart of the girl.

There seemed no sacrilege to Rita, in that moment, because her father was lying still in the next room. It was almost as if she could hear his soft chuckle. *"Love'll come sometime . . . a good, lastin' love. Who knows? Maybe this nephew of Matt's—"*

Her heart soared at memory of the words. It was as if her father had spoken again, to let her know the truth. For this was love—a real and lasting love that had come, like balm, to her grief-torn heart.

GARY took care of everything. He understood about concealing the fact that Angus had left nothing. Gary knew the reason: that Angus had been proud of

his holdings and had held on, even tried to enlarge, in spite of falling prices, failing range. The other ranchers knew only that the cattle baron had sold before he died; that was all.

"A canny move," they said, "else someone would have taken advantage of the girl's inexperience."

Rita was glad they didn't realize the truth. But more than anything else, she was grateful for Gary . . . his protective kindness, his never-ceasing gentleness, the new glory he brought to her heart.

When Jode Cannon came to the house, the afternoon after the funeral, Rita wondered dully how she had ever thought she loved him. Jode was handsome enough, with his crisp, yellow curls and gray-green, long-lashed eyes; with the dimples in his cheeks and the deep cleft in his chin; with his big, fine body, and his ever-ready smile.

"I had to come, little Rita," he said, in the low voice that once had sent her heart racing. "I heard about your trouble, and I came—for there's never been any change in my heart, sweet. I love you now, just as I did four years ago, Rita, darlin'."

Her lovely mouth quivered a little as she looked up at him. Her deep-blue eyes, in their fringe of silken black lashes, were wide with desperate honesty. "I'm sorry —so sorry, Jode," she said. "I was such a child, then. I didn't know my own mind."

His hands came to her shoulders, while he looked down into her face. "Just as lovely as ever," he said. "Rita, I can teach you to love me again. I want to take care of you, little sweet."

She shook her dusky head. "I'm sorry, Jode!"

"You mean,—" he said hoarsely, "that there's someone else?"

A dreamy, tender smile parted her sweet lips. "Yes," she nodded, "there's somebody else."

Jode's hands dropped from her slim shoulders. The muscle of one cheek twitched, making the dimple flash in and out. He drew a deep breath, smiled.

"Well, I reckon that lets me out," he said. "But I ain't givin' up hope, not till you're the other man's wife. And things may change. If they do, you'll come to me, Rita? Promise me that, sweet?"

"Of course!" But her heart laughed at the thought. Things change? Her love for Gary? That could happen only when the sun lost its brightness.

It was a full moon that night, when Rita walked with Gary along the creek bank. The light shimmered on the waters and gave a misty glow to each separate willow leaf and blade of grass. It was lovelier here than she'd ever known it . . . but then Rita's heart laughed at its own secret—never before had Gary walked this trail with her!

Something of that inner radiance must have shown in her delicate face. For, when she looked up at Gary, her head thrown back, his brown eyes were suddenly alive with flaming tender lights.

"Rita, Rita! You're lovely!" There was something like awe in his tones. "You're—"

For a breath-stopping moment, the two of them were still. Then slowly his arms opened, and without a word, Rita slipped into them. Gary's lips brushed her fragrant hair and her closed eyes . . . traced the soft contour of her satiny cheeks. Then with sudden fervor his arms tightened, crushed her so fiercely against him that she could hear the thud of his heart as if it were her very own. Her slender, vibrant body seemed to melt and become one with his.

A new, thrilling delight came to her; it was as if life were rushing radiantly through every pulse. And when his lips touched hers, the world stood still, in ecstasy. It was as if night drew near, wrapping them in its star-spangled wings.

FOR long, sweet, countless moments, they stood there. Then Gary laid his cheek against her gleaming night-black hair. "You're dear—so dear" he murmured. "Uncle Matt will love you, when I take you home."

A tingling thrill surged through Rita. She was alive with a white, magic fire. "Home!" she murmured. "Home!" Then, with a little catch in her low, soft voice: "Gary—our home!" and she hid her face against his shoulder. Her heart was beating madly.

Strangely, then, she felt his muscles go tense and hard. His arms dropped from about her. She heard the quick rasp of his indrawing breath, and looked up. She gave a little cry at the ghastly grayness of his lean face. It was etched with deep lines, as if he had aged years, in that single second. A strange agony tore at the girl's breast.

"Gary! Gary, what is it?" she cried out.

Slowly he brought his golden gaze to hers. "Rita! I'd no right to kiss you!"

"No right?" She laughed shakily. Her slim hands, light as flowers, touched his shoulders. "No right . . . when I love you so?"

He took a step back, and all at once Rita knew that the moon had ceased to shine. The coldness of the world was sweeping by on the gentle night breeze.

"Gary!" she whispered, and shivered.

"Rita, darlin'—" he framed each word slowly "—I had no right to kiss you, because I'm engaged to another girl. Emily Boling. Our weddin' is planned for next month."

There was silence—a long, chilling silence. Rita felt as if the blood were draining from her heart. Angus had said always to smile when you wanted to cry, and so Rita smiled.

Gary went on, in a quiet voice, almost savagely restrained and passionless. "Emily is sensitive, delicate. She's easily hurt. And she loves me. That's why I had no right to kiss you. It wasn't fair to Emily."

"No, it wasn't fair—to Emily." Her lips seemed frozen in that smile.

"We've got to forget this, Rita," he husked. "Got to! You'll go on to Uncle Matt's. I'll arrange everything. And I'll stay away from home—not go back till we've fought it out."

Gary came closer, then, and Rita saw the hurt in his young face, the tightness of his mouth, the stricken look in his dear brown eyes. Desperately she wanted to help this man she loved.

"Gary—Gary!" she cried. "Don't look so hurt! You're right! Everything will be all right, Gary! Oh, I know it!"

He didn't put his arms about her; just stood there, staring down at her as if he were trying to trace every line of her beauty in his soul.

"Rita—oh, my dearest!" he cried out. "Why was I such a beast? But the sight of you, the sweetness of you, drove everything else from my heart." Then, abruptly: "Goodnight, Rita. Goodnight . . . and goodbye . . . for a while."

"Goodbye!" she whispered, and, strangely, her father's last words came to her. "See you at sun-up, darlin'!" she finished.

There would be no sun-up for her and Gary. This was really goodbye . . . for she never could bear seeing him again.

"Goodbye!" she said again, and turned up the path to the house.

A TALL figure rose from the porch steps as she came up. It was Jode Cannon, his blond hair gleaming in the moonlight as he swept off his hat. "Rita, I had to come back!" He smiled gently. "I've carried you in my heart for so long, darlin', that I can't let you go."

Rita looked back toward the creek trail, saw the tall figure riding a gray horse away . . . toward town. For an instant

she stood very still, her delicate face uplifted a little. The pale glow from the slender young moon fell upon her, gave her a star-like, ethereal look.

"Jode," she said, "do you care for me enough to take me when I don't love you?" Her voice was low, little more than a whisper.

He caught her hands; a light sprang into his handsome face. "Care enough!" he cried. "Rita, I worship—adore you! I'd take you on any terms—any way you want it, sweetheart!"

Her blue eyes were bright with the tears that were warm against her lids, but she only said quietly, "Jode, I love somebody else. I always will. It's only honest to tell you. But if you want to marry me, take me away—tomorrow—I'll be a true wife. I'll try to make you happy."

His arms reached out with sudden brute force and jerked her to him. She gave a little cry at the pain. "Darlin'—my own little wife!" he cried. "You've made me the happiest man in the world, Rita! I'll come for you early in the mornin'. We'll be married, then I'll take you away—as far as you want to go, sweetheart!"

"Thank you, Jode. . . ."

His hot, hard kisses fell upon her face and lips, then, but there was no response in Rita. She knew only a pain that was as big as the world . . . and a faint relief that now she need not go to Matt Gale's to live. She need never see Gary belonging to another girl.

CHAPTER TWO

Bride for an Hour

IN SOME way, Rita lived through the night. She got up, dully, in the morning, and dressed—to go to her wedding. Jode loved her, wanted her. She would become his wife. Matt Gale would understand that a girl had to go with her husband.

She was all ready, waiting with benumbed heart and body, when a rig drove up. But it wasn't Jode! It was a driver from the livery stable, in town. He handed her a package, and Rita knew a strange uprush of joy through the heaviness in her heart, as she recognized Gary's handwriting on the cover.

She flew to her room, and her hands trembled as she tore away the wrappings. She stared wonderingly at the great package of money that lay there, along with a railway ticket. Then, as she read Gary's letter, all the dead weight came back. The strong, clean handwriting said:

> Rita, darling:
>
> For once, I've got to tell you that I love you. It wouldn't be fair not to say it. But we both know that we couldn't find happiness in hurting someone else, so this is really goodbye, my sweet. When we meet again, it will be as good friends, with love buried deep in our hearts.
>
> I am enclosing your ticket to Old Nugget. Uncle Matt is expecting you. Tell him for me, dear, that I'm delayed. He'll ask no questions. And give him this money—using, of course, as much as you need first. He'd want you to do that.
>
> Goodbye, my darling. May you find it in your heart to forgive me, dearest one. And may God bless and keep you. For I love you, now and always.
>
> Gary.

There were no tears for Rita—only that numb misery, as if her heart had turned to ice. Even the flame, as she burned Gary's letter, didn't seem to warm her fingers; they were stiff and cold as she thrust the money into her reticule, then went out to the porch to answer Jode's call.

The numbness held Rita, through all the long trip to the county seat. She heard Jode's voice, droning on and on, but she realized little of what he was saying. Vaguely she knew that he was making plans for their future.

"We'll buy a proved claim," he told

her. "I know minin'. We'll get a good mine—farther south, if you'd like it, darlin'."

She nodded, staring straight ahead. "Yes," she said, "let's go south . . . far away."

"Our honeymoon trip!" He smiled at her, his gray-green eyes shining. "We'll hunt our new home. You'll like that, darlin'?"

"Yes," she said again, frozen with the pain that held her heart in its sharp grip.

It was almost evening when they drove into the dusty, thriving town, and stopped the weary horses. Jode came to lift her down, and his handsome face was flushed with embarrassment.

"Honey," he said, "this was so sudden, it caught me short of money. I haven't enough to pay for things . . ."

She shrugged, opened her reticule. She had a few dollars left from selling the furniture, and she handed it over to Jode. He took it apologetically.

"I'm sorry to have to do this, darlin', but—" She saw his eyes light on her opened bag. "You oughtn't to carry all that money around with you. Somethin' might happen."

She closed the bag quickly, as if she were shutting it on a painful memory. "I'll take care of it," she promised. She'd send the money to Matt Gale, she told herself, so she could start to forget.

Forget? When Gary's name beat like funeral drums in her ears, all through that brief ceremony? When Gary's face, with its golden-lighted brown eyes, seemed etched into her very heart? And when memory of Gary's kiss came like a blinding flash, as the old justice of the peace said to Jode, "Now ye can kiss yer bride!"

Jode's bride! Rita wanted to run away. She wanted to die. Instead, she had to walk down the street with Jode to the dingy hotel; had to go into the big room the clerk assigned them. And she had to face Jode, who came toward her, his gray-green eyes agleam, his arms outstretched. For, now, Jode was her husband. . . .

RITA'S blue eyes widened in her ivory-pale face, which was set like an exquisite cameo in the dusky sheen of her hair. For the first time she realized what she had done; she had built a wall between herself and Gary, and she must live within the wall.

Jode's arms were drawing her close, smothering her. His lips traced a hot,

A SKEPTIC IS CONVERTED
ANN: I dread taking this awful-tasting medicine. It leaves me weak as a kitten.
RUTH: You're foolish to take a cathartic like that. Try my stand-by ... Ex-Lax.
ANN: Why, this tastes just like fine chocolate! But will it really work?
RUTH: Yes, indeed! Ex-Lax is effective—yet it doesn't upset you.
LATER
ANN: Thanks to you and Ex-Lax, I feel wonderful this morning.
RUTH: I knew you would! In our family we all use Ex-Lax! It's so dependable.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet gentle! No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for every member of the family.
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searing path across her averted cheek, her neck—then ruthlessly found her lips. Time dragged its tortuous length while that kiss lasted . . . hateful, interminable. But at last Jode lifted his head, stood looking down into her white, shocked face.

"You're scared!" He laughed, as if he were exultant. "You're tremblin'—but I reckon all brides are like that!"

Rita bent her head forward and closed her eyes. Black lashes, like a veil of smoke, lay motionless on her white soft cheeks. The sudden vision of a different kind of marriage had come to her: with herself standing here, waiting for Gary to take her into his arms! The thought sent a quivering, dizzying sensation through her numbed brain.

Jode's eager voice brought her back to reality. She was no longer in his arms, and she was glad. "You needn't be scared, honey," he said. "I'm aimin' to be mighty nice to you. I'll take care of you. You're so little and sweet and helpless, darlin'. You needn't worry any more. I'm takin' over your affairs, from now on. First, I'll put that money roll of yours in a safe place."

Rita shook her head, backed away, glad to change the subject. "This money belongs to Matt Gale," she said. "I'm sending it to him by express in the morning."

Jode's handsome face went blank for a moment. Then he smiled. "He won't mind us borrowin' a little of it, for the time bein'. A thousand, say. We can put it back right away."

Rita smiled faintly. "A thousand? That's like a fortune, Jode. I know you haven't a great deal, and we'll need every cent, but—"

"Say, what you givin' me?" The smile had gone, now. "You must have got fifty thousand for the ranch, at least, and another fifty for the cattle. The Sawtooth was well stocked."

Rita's soft lips quivered as she told her father's pitiful secret. "The ranch and the stock just canceled our debts—but dad was proud, so we kept it quiet. I'm penniless, Jode!"

There was silence for a long time; a throbbing, quivering silence. Rita stared up at Jode. Suspicion filled his face, while his narrowed gaze probed hers. Then anger twisted his features to ugliness. His hand came out, gripped her shoulder in fury.

"You mean—I married you for nothing?"

Rita's lovely, candid eyes, wide and deeply blue, regarded him for an instant.

Her voice was low, quiet. "We're married, Jode. If you love me, even a little, money won't matter. I'll work, and help you. We can build a new life, a good life. You and I—together . . ."

"Hell!" His rasping voice broke in, as if he hadn't heard her. "Fooled me! Got me to marry you, when you was sweet on another jasper, because I thought it would be worth my while!"

RITA'S dark head was high. Blue flames blazed in her eyes. "You wanted just money? You lied—about loving me?"

"Love!" He spat out the word. "It's to be had anywhere for a few kisses! You tricked me—kept still about bein' a pauper—till you'd got me in the halter! Then you prat about love!"

"It meant so little, to me—losing all we had—that I didn't dream it mattered to you. But you wouldn't understand that. Being the sort you are—" she couldn't keep the scorn from her voice —"you'd never realize that I was too filled with heartache to give it a second thought. And now—I'm glad I haven't a cent to bring you!"

"Glad, are you? Well, you ain't such a pauper!" He snatched the reticule from her hands. "There's enough money

in here to last us a while, and Matt Gale can call it a weddin' present."

She tried to get the bag, but he thrust it behind him on the table, laughed as she beat at him with her small fists.

"You'd dare to steal Matt's money! You devil—you thief!"

"Mighty pretty when you're mad!" He caught her to him, his breath hot on her cheek. "I was riled for a minute when I found out I'd been fooled, but I'm over it now, sweetness. Lovin' my little wife won't be bad . . . as long as the money holds out. Kiss me, darlin'."

He held her tightly against his big body, so tightly that she felt the gun under his left armpit. A secret holster! She drew a deep breath, and when his lips touched hers, fiercely, greedily, she slipped her hand inside his coat, and her fingers closed about the gun-butt.

Quick as a flash she drew it, pressed it against Jode. "Get away from me!" she ordered. "Get away—or I'll shoot!"

Jode's hands went into the air, and he backed away. Still holding the gun on him, she caught up the reticule. "You'd better go!" she said calmly. "Go now, Jode!"

Surprisingly, Jode grinned. "Smart gal," he said. "No money, no honeymoon. I'm broke, too, you see—stony broke. So we'd best call the whole thing off. Like this!" He picked up the marriage certificate, tore it into small bits, and threw them into the grate.

Rita still held the gun on him, but he kept on grinning impudently. "It's too bad. I could have enjoyed lovin' you, but maybe it's for the best. I married once before, over Pecos way, and I reckon it still holds, so our marriage wouldn't have been accordin' to Hoyle, anyhow."

He stared at her an instant longer, and then he left. Rita sank into a chair, lost in a maze of whirling thoughts. Yet all thoughts seemed to roll themselves into one—the memory of Gary, his arms about her, his lips against hers.

It was a homely thing that jerked her back to her senses: the smell of food from the dining room below. She realized then that she was hungry. She had eaten nothing all day. She hadn't wanted to eat yesterday, nor any day since her father died, but Gary had been there to make her. Gary! A spasm of pain flashed through her again at the thought of Gary, his brown eyes alight with tenderness . . . of Gary, holding her close, kissing her.

SHE stood up. To drive thoughts of Gary from her mind, she made ready for supper, washed her pale face, combed out the lustrous, dusky curls, knotted them at the back of her lovely head. She picked up her reticule, opened it—and remembered. She had given every cent of her own money to Jode, and he had gone away with it! She would have to use Matt Gale's, as Gary had told her. The kindly man who had been her father's life-long friend would be glad, and happy.

Rita kept her mind on Matt Gale while she ate her supper. If she could do that, she might forget Gary for a moment or two; might give her heart a little rest from the awful ache that filled it. Gary—lost to her, forever!

But it was no use. Gary's low voice was the only sound that murmured in her ears. Gary's face—tender, grave, beneath the thatch of rich auburn hair—was all her vision could compass. Gary's eyes seemed always to be looking into hers. And all the longing of her young body was for the feel of his sweet embrace, his tender, possessive kiss.

So filled were her thoughts with Gary, as she left the table, that for a moment she thought she was dreaming—when he appeared before her in the short narrow hall that led from the dining room. She stopped, one slim hand to her throat to

still its thudding beat, but no words could come from her lips.

Gary spoke. "Rita!" he said hoarsely. "I heard—I was afraid . . ." Then he caught her arm. "Come in here, honey!" he said, and drew her into the ladies' parlor, off the hall.

The room was empty. There was no light save for the faint reflection of the hanging lamp in the hallway. But it was enough for Rita to see his tense face, and the lights that were flickering in his golden brown eyes. For a long moment they looked at each other. Then, with a quick exclamation, Gary opened his arms, drew her close.

He held her tightly, as she had longed to be held . . . until her very heart seemed to pour out into her palms and beat there, as she pressed them tight against his chest. She didn't lift her face for his kiss, not right away; this moment was enough. Anything greater would be too beautiful to be borne. She felt as if she were going to faint with the joy of it, when Gary put his hand gently beneath her chin, turned her radiant face up to his.

Gary lost his gentleness, then. His mouth was rough, demanding. It was a sort of bandit-kiss, over-riding all the defense she had built up . . . robbing her of her resolve to run away . . . taking all the hurt and bitterness that had surged within her these past hours.

She loved Gary's kiss, loved the pain of his demanding mouth against hers. Her heart was a crazy pounding thing, as she pressed closer, drinking in the ecstasy of his lips.

Then Gary spoke hoarsely. "Rita, I had to see you again! I rode out this morning, and found you gone! I've been frantic!"

She raised her shining eyes. His nearness enveloped her with golden warmth.

"Gary—Gary! You came—"

"And found you!" he breathed. "Darlin', when I found you gone, I knew then that nothin' else matters in all the world, except the two of us. Why try to play fair, save others from hurt, when I'm mad from want of you? We'll go away, far away—together!"

Savagely, he jerked out the words. The mists fell away from Rita's soul. She saw the strain on Gary's dear face, the shame in his eyes. Love mustn't do this to him! Love must be honest, and proud, or it would be an eternal barrier between them.

SHE drew a little away, clutched her slim hands tightly, as if to still the hurt of her heart that had lain beating there.

"Gary," she said, and her sweet mouth was tremulous, "we can't build happiness on the hurt of others. And to run away—from your work, from your uncle's need of you, from your promise to Emily—would be a shameful thing. We—we can't, Gary!"

"What can we do, then—when I love you so?" he asked huskily. "What, Rita?" He caught her hands, clung to them, as if for guidance.

She didn't answer. She let this moment rest between them . . . this last moment, when their hearts still beat to the same rhythm, and their lips still burned from the kiss that must be their last . . . this beautiful moment that lingered after the full chord of harmony had been struck between them, as a violin string will quiver out a dying, poignantly sweet echo of a clear note.

"What can we do?" Gary whispered again, his brown eyes full upon hers. "You must decide, Rita."

She closed her eyes, prayed desperately for strength, then opened them again. "We must go on," she said, "with our love only a sweet memory—like the

memory of this morning's dawn. We must be brave, strong. We must never see each other, alone."

He drew a long, quivering breath that was almost a sob. There was a frantic tightening of his grasp, before he loosed her hands. His voice was like something dead.

"You're right . . . I guess you are, darlin'. And I've made things worse by comin'." Then, anxiously: "You weren't runnin' away, Rita? Uncle Matt is lookin' for you. He'd be hurt—mighty hurt."

"I don't want to hurt anybody, Gary."

A little silence, then he asked hesitantly, "Shall I take you to Old Nugget, darlin'? Can we fight it out there—together?"

"No!" she cried sharply. That, she couldn't bear. She couldn't stand seeing Emily Boling greet Gary. She'd go now, the way her father had planned it . . . but she'd find a job before Gary returned home. "No, Gary. Stay away—for a time. Give me a chance—"

"I'd like it that way, too, darlin'," he said huskily. "And there's a train in half an hour. May I put you on it?"

She nodded, and then the silence was a terrible thing. Like an agonizing tide, Rita's longing swept over her—the yearning to be held in his arms again, to feel his lips crushing hers in sweet pain.

Gary felt it, too; she saw his clenched hands, the pulses beating at his temples. In another instant . . .

She found strength to whirl, to choke out, "My things upstairs—I'll get them! We must make the train!"

"Yes, Rita!"

Gary didn't speak again until he put her on the train. Then he said, "Goodbye, darlin'!" . . . and she knew he meant, "Goodbye forever." Never would there be another sun-up for them.

Rita almost sobbed as the trucks began to click somberly over the steel rails.

CHAPTER THREE

A Dream Come True

THROUGH all that long, slow trip northward, Rita thought of Gary. She knew she should be sorry that he had followed her. But she wasn't. She had another memory—of the flame-kiss that had burned through to her very heart. This much she would have to remember, through all the lonely years to come.

In some way, the long hours dragged by—the night hours, and the day. There were waits at small, lonely junctions, as she changed from one train to another; uncomfortable waits, but Rita heeded none of it. She was in a maze of memory, of numbed feelings.

It was late afternoon when she started on the last lap of the journey, into a world of far-flung mountains, deep canyons, and of rushing streams of water. She felt carried away from her old life, from everything familiar. Higher and higher went the train, lurching around sharp turns, chugging laboriously; then, at last, the conductor called, "Old Nugget!"

It was Matt Gale himself who lifted her from the train, enfolding her in his arms and holding her close, as if he meant no grief or hurt ever to touch her. It was, for the moment, like having her father back. It was even more; it was as if she had a part of Gary.

For even in the dim mountain twilight, Rita could see that Matt was like Gary. He was handsome. The eighteeen years more than Gary's twenty-two had touched him lightly; he looked more like an older brother of Gary's, than an uncle. Matt was lithe-muscled, slender. His hair was auburn-red, with only a sprinkling of gray, and his brown eyes held the same golden fires that Gary's did.

"Rita! Rita!" He brushed the dusky curls back from her forehead, studied her

face for a long moment. "You're like your mother, darlin'. Eyes like mountain larkspur, and your hair . . . only your mother's ever had that sheen. Night-black, yet with glints of the sun in it!" He kissed her forehead gently. "You make it seem as if she'd never gone away."

Rita smiled through her tears, remembering that Matt had loved her mother, and had lost her. Now, with her own heartache and loss so fresh, she knew how he must have suffered through the years.

The train chugged noisily away, and Rita watched it, leaning her head against Matt's shoulder, fighting off the flash of loneliness that came with a surge.

Then she heard the sweet, plaintive voice, close at hand. "Where's Gary? Here I ride all the way down from the mine, to meet him—and he isn't here! Where is he?"

Slowly Rita lifted her head. She knew that voice, though she'd never heard it before. She didn't need Matt's words to tell her.

"That's right, Emily," he said gently. "Here I've been so excited about seein' Rita again, that I plumb forgot Gary." He smiled at Rita. "Honey, this is Emily Boling, the girl—"

"I know!" Rita could force a smile to her lips as she held out her hand, but she couldn't have borne to hear Matt put the truth into the words, to say—this is *the girl Gary is going to marry!* "Gary told me about you," she said to Emily. Then, truthfully: "And now I realize what he meant when he said you were beautiful."

IN HER wildest dreams, Rita had never imagined anyone so lovely. She understood, all at once, why Gary had felt that he must protect her. As fragile as a Dresden doll, was Emily. She was smaller even than Rita, and slender. Her long curls were flaxen, almost silver, and her skin had the delicate blue-whiteness of skimmed milk. It looked as if a mere touch would bruise it.

Emily's mouth was a quivering bow, and her eyes were large and gray—silver gray, with a childish look, as if she could cry at the slightest unkindness. And yet, as Rita met that wide gaze, she caught something quite mature in the gray depths: appraisal, shrewdness, and suspicion.

But the lowering lids seemed to express nothing but disappointment. "Gary's telegram just told Uncle Matt to meet the train!" The soft lips were trembling. "And I thought he was coming! I came all the way down—to surprise him . . . and now—" A tear rolled down the delicate cheek.

"Gary had business to finish up," Rita told her. "I'm so sorry."

An instant's pause, then Matt patted Emily's slim shoulder. "Brace up, honey. He'll be here soon. I should have warned you he might be detained."

Rita was grateful for Matt's quick understanding. As he picked up her luggage, he went on casually, "We'd better get started. You're tired, and Pleasant's got supper waitin'. So come on, honey, to your new home—in a new world."

A new world . . . Rita felt that it truly was, as they drove up the mountain trail toward the mines. This world nestled among far-flung peaks, so close to the stars that their gleam was a bright warming mantle. Emily's chatter seemed far away.

They left Emily at her father's cottage. "I'm so glad you've come, Rita!" Emily smiled wistfully, as Matt helped her down. "It'll be heavenly to have another girl to help me plan my wedding!" And then she was gone—but Rita was wondering at the sidelong, narrowed glance from these gray eyes, as Emily had turned away. . . .

Matt's home was a great one, built of

rocks, overlooking the maze of gullies below. Behind it, great steep-sided walls of rocks rose straight up to the new moon, like fairy castles lifting up to the clouds. This place of stark beauty had been Gary's home—and would be his home, with another girl.

"The Driftin' Burro's around the shoulder there—the entrance. I struck it when my burro drifted one night, and I had to hunt him up. Now, after eighteen years, it's just about honeycombed the mountain."

"Well, if that ain't like a tarnation man!" interrupted a sharp voice from the porch. "Standin' there, gabbin' about the mine, when the gal's most likely worn to a frazzle by the trains, and not a decent bite to eat since she left home!"

"Aunt Pleasant!" Rita cried.

She hurried up the steps toward the tall, gaunt woman whose coal-black hair and snapping black eyes belied the lines on her middle-aged face. It was Matt's spinster sister, who kept house for him.

"It's good to see you, Aunt Pleasant!"

Rita wasn't deceived by the austere look on the other woman's face, nor the tight line of her mouth. She remembered how much kindness was hidden beneath all those brisk ways. Sugar cookies slipped into a little girl's hand; tarts, and gingerbread-men. Scolding, while she fashioned a rag doll to take the place of the broken china one, and gentle-handed as she tied up little girls' cut fingers and bruises.

Aunt Pleasant's long arms opened and she held Rita tenderly, as if she were her very own. Her voice, though, stayed brusque. "You've grown up, Rita!" she said.

Matt laughed. "Aw, now, Plessie, can't you come right out and say she's the prettiest thing you've laid eyes on, these many moons?" he demanded, as he led the way into the living room. "Or have you been studyin' the lookin' glass too much to see anything else?"

Aunt Pleasant sniffed. "Pretty is as pretty does!" she said scathingly. "And that puts you in the crowbait class, Matt Gale! . . . Come on, Rita. You get freshened up. Then we'll have supper. It'll do you good."

IT DID do Rita good. In the warm comfort of Matt's friendliness, and of Aunt Pleasant's sharp kindness, a bit of Rita's hurt and loneliness faded away. She found herself laughing at some of the things Matt said. And when tiny Hercules Orlinger, the mine manager, came in for a moment, she remembered to tease him about Aunt Pleasant, who had gone into the kitchen.

"Don't tell me you're still single, Herk!" she bantered. "With such a good-looking woman as Aunt Pleasant around!" For the romance between the little miner and the tall spinster was a

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thing of long standing. "What's the matter, Herk?"

Hercules was small, but his voice was big. His clear blue eyes grew troubled under the thatch of his gray hair. "Same old trouble, honey," he rumbled. "I get Plessie talked up to the marryin' p'int, and then somebody danged well talks me into—"

"Herk—you don't mean you still gamble!"

"Once in a while," he confessed lugubriously. Then he brightened. "But I bet my next month's pay, and the purple shirt I won off'n one o' the night crew last week, that I don't get tricked into any more of it!"

"There you go." Aunt Pleasant stalked up to the table, slammed down a platter of fried chicken. "If judgment day comes, you'd bet the Angel Gabriel you could out-holler his horn. I know you!"

"What'll you bet?" Hercules demanded quickly. Then, realizing, he flinched. "Now listen here, Plessie—" He followed her into the kitchen.

Left alone, Rita and Matt sat quietly for a time, then Matt looked at her, his brown eyes grave.

"It isn't like Gary to let you come alone," he said gently. "Can you tell me about him, dear?"

She was silent a moment, quivering under the question, throbbing under sudden memory of Gary. "I had no right to kiss you," Gary had said, "for I'm engaged to another girl." Again she knew the awful desolation of the world crashing to bits about her, and her eyes darkened to blue pools of agony.

"Rita!" Matt said huskily. "Somethin's wrong. Tell me, dear." He caught her hands, held them, and again his friendliness brought a sense of comfort, of peace, to Rita.

Fear was in his voice. Matt Gale was like that. If he knew the truth, he would suffer, on Gary's account, and on her own—even on Emily Boling's account, because Gary loved another girl.

Rita forced a smile to her lips. "It's nothing, really," she said, "only—Gary and I just don't seem to get along very well."

She was sorry at the quick soberness in Matt's face, but glad she had thought of the excuse. It would give her a real reason for leaving before Gary came back . . . better that than for Matt to know how broken was her heart—her life.

"I'm sorry, Rita," Matt said slowly. "I want you to be happy here—want it more than anything in the world. As for Gary, he's marryin' Emily next month. I'll fix up the house we used to live in for them. That will make it easier, all around."

Rita shook her head; started to tell Matt she wouldn't be here when Gary married, but he laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Everything will be all right, Rita. It's the happiest day of my life, havin' you come here. It's a dream . . . come true."

Rita looked at him, then, saw the happy lights in his brown eyes, the radiance of his smile. And she knew that he spoke the truth. Later on, before Gary came back, she could tell Matt that she must leave.

For the present, she could sink back into the sweet joy of being in this place that was filled with thoughts of Gary—whose arms had brought her heaven, whose lips had been like the first ecstatic glimpse of Paradise.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mountain Lover

GARY seemed very close to Rita through those next few days. Everywhere she went, everywhere she looked, she was reminded of him. There was

his work jacket, hanging in the back hall. It smelled of Gary's tobacco, when Rita laid her cheek against it . . . and its sleeves still held the familiar shaping of Gary's arms.

Gary's horses were in the corral. Matt pointed out a sturdy yet slender-legged filly. "That's Gary's favorite," he said. "He gentled her, himself. I'm turnin' her over to you to ride."

So Rita rode Gary's mount over the mountain trails, for she spent as much time outdoors as she could, those next few days, trying to find peace, trying to get used to the heaviness in her heart.

Matt rode with her, at the end of the second week. "The mine can get along without me," he laughed. "I want to show you around. I'm right proud of the Driftin' Burro. It's the biggest mine in these parts."

"It's like a city, almost!" Rita said, as she saw the great clusters of buildings that housed the mine employes.

"It's goin' to be still bigger," Matt smiled. "I've bought out the old abandoned Susy Bell, and we've struck a vein of gold that runs straight toward it. The Susy Bell comes in from this other slope, see?" He pointed with his riding quirt. "We're about ready to break through into it from our lower tunnels. Then we'll clean it out, timber it up fresh, and get rid of the poison damp.

"I'd like to know more about mining. It's a new world for me."

"I'll teach you," Matt said eagerly, and he told her about the shafts and tunnels and levels; about lodes and veins and ore.

Rita adored it. If she shut her eyes when Matt talked, she could almost imagine he was Gary. Besides, this was the work Gary loved; his life would be here. Later, after she had gone away, she could think of Gary being here, picture him moving over these trails.

"I'm glad you've told me all this!" There was a little catch in her voice as she turned to Matt. "It means so much to me!"

The next morning wasn't so pleasant. Just as Rita was ready to start out, Emily Boling rode up. The lovely, fragile girl's pale curls made a gold and silver mist about her small, exquisite face; her slender figure was a thing of beauty in a handsome blue riding habit. For Emily never rode astride, as did Rita, who had been raised on the range. Emily had a side-saddle, and looked like one of the figures right out of Godey's *Lady's Book*.

Rita had to ride with Emily that morning. She had to listen to Emily's chatter of Gary, of the coming wedding. Once Emily turned in the saddle, looked back at Rita curiously.

"I'm going to have a real wedding," she said, "but there aren't any other girls around here. Will you be my bridesmaid, Rita?"

Rita caught her breath sharply. Through a swaying, dizzy world, she saw Emily's small, pointed face; her blurred vision seemed to focus on that face, to see clearly the triumphant smile that lurked at the corners of the red mouth. She remembered her father's teaching: to smile when you wanted to cry.

Sudden tears were warm against Rita's lids . . . but she smiled, and lifted her head proudly high. "I'm sorry," she said softly, "but with dad just gone, I couldn't take part in anything so festive as a wedding. Not for a long time."

"Oh, I never have things the way I want them!" Emily cried petulantly.

Disappointment shaded her gray eyes for a second, but Rita sensed that somehow the disappointment didn't all come from lack of a bridesmaid. Had Emily guessed? Was she wanting to make Rita endure the hurt of being bridesmaid at a wedding that meant the breaking of her heart?

"Gary will understand," Rita went on, forcing herself to speak the dearly familiar name. "Dad and Matt were like brothers."

"But they weren't!" Emily cried sharply. "Gary's all the family Uncle Matt's got. Gary'll get the mine some day, and it'll be worth millions! We'll be rich, Gary and I!"

"I suppose so," Rita spoke lifelessly, but her slim hands gripped the reins with a fierce, quick gesture.

How could money matter to Emily, when she had Gary?

IT WAS almost noon when they got back to the house, and Emily stayed to eat. She announced her decision to stay in a matter-of-fact way that showed she already considered herself a part of the family. And as she ate, she still chattered—of Gary, of their plans, until it seemed to Rita that she had to get up and run far away.

She saw Aunt Pleasant's searching gaze on her, tried to smile.

"Matter, Rita?" the older woman asked sharply. "You look peaked. You're just pickin' at your food."

Emily's gray eyes went wide. Her voice was sweet as honey. "Rita's too interested in my wedding plans to eat, I guess." She laughed softly.

"Mebby that's what's ailin' her! Weddin's are for them as like 'em."

"Why, Aunt Plessie! Don't you think weddings are wonderful?" Emily breathed.

"Wonderful — huh!" Aunt Pleasant sniffed. "Marriage is like a trough of hot swill. The first one's comin' up, gettin' their noses burned and squealin' to high heaven, don't keep the rest from crowdin' in for some of the same."

Everyone laughed, Emily's treble rising high and sweet above the rest. "Aunt Pleasant, do you think I'll get my nose burned?" she demanded gaily.

"I reckon I wasn't thinkin' of you," the gaunt old woman said dryly.

There would have been an awkward pause, if Matt had not spoken suddenly. "By the way, Emily, I almost forgot. A letter came for you this morning, and I brought it along. Knew you'd be here!" He pulled a thick envelope from his pocket.

Emily took it eagerly. "Oh, it's from Gary! A long, long letter. I'm going over here by the window to read it, all by myself." Her pale face flushed as she got up from the table, went into the shelter of the bay window, where Aunt Pleasant kept her plants.

Matt talked on, and Rita tried to listen, but it was hard. That clear, strong writing of Gary's . . . those rustling sheets of paper that he had penned . . . all of it had brought back in vivid sharpness the memory of Gary, himself. She could almost see Gary's bright head, gleaming under the sun . . . his brown eyes, alight with golden flames . . . his arms, his lips. A tingling yearning filled her, suddenly —a poignant, unbearable longing, for the joy of Gary's love.

"Uncle Matt!" Emily's sweet voice, tremulous now, broke into her thinking.

Looking up, Rita saw something in the gray eyes that looked like panic. It vanished, almost immediately, and the girl laughed nervously.

"Gary doesn't want to wait for our wedding," she said. "He's asking me to come to him, right away, and be married in the East, then take a nice long honeymoon. And I'm going. We'll have the wedding at my cousin's. I'll start Monday." Hastily she gathered up her hat and gauntlets. "Bring Rita over tomorrow, Uncle Matt, will you?" she asked. "She can help me get ready—to go to Gary!"

Again those limpid gray eyes met Rita's, and this time there was no mistaking the hatred lurking there—hatred, and anger, and malice. Emily knew Rita

loved Gary . . . and was torturing her purposely.

Somehow, she managed to smile. "I'll be glad to help you," she said, as Emily hurried out the door.

RITA went outside, too, then; away from the house, down to the banks of the mountain creek that tumbled in rushing white swiftness toward the valley. The noise of the stream echoed through the canyon it cut; that's why Rita didn't hear Matt following her—until he spoke. She looked up at him, and the image of her face, delicately cut, was like a lovely etching.

"Matt!" she said. "Matt!" And a wistful quiet, like twilight, came to her blue, dark eyes.

"Rita—little darlin'!" Matt stood close before her, and she saw the pain in his brown eyes. "You aren't happy, dear. I know it. God meant you to be a gay, radiant thing, but somehow you've been cheated. Can you tell me, Rita?"

Matt was so dear. Yet she couldn't bring more hurt to him. She reached out, caught his two hands.

"Matt, you're good—good, and I love you. I guess you'll never know how dear you are to me, Matt!" Her voice was low and rich with earnestness as she stood there, small and brave and temptingly sweet; she didn't see that the man before her was trembling, that his lean face was drawn in tense lines. "So you've got to understand what I'm trying to tell you, Matt!"

"Rita—is there another man? Someone who has hurt you?" His breath was a rasping thing, his eyes blazing, golden fires. "That much . . . I must know, Rita!"

There was a moment's silence, while Rita held tightly to Matt's hands, praying for strength to go on. In her slim, creamy throat a tiny pulse beat rapidly, like a second heart.

"Is it . . . because of Gary? Has he—" He stopped, as if the words would not come, and she saw that his forehead was damp with the stress of his emotions, his dear mouth hard-held, grim.

Her blue eyes were steady as they held his, and she lied staunchly to save him the hurt.

"No, Matt. There's no other man. It's just—I guess I'm homesick here. I'm wanting familiar things . . . far spaces and green grass and cattle. You—you do understand, Matt?"

It was as if he had been freed from binding shackles. His head went high again, the strain left his face. He smiled, a little embarrassedly, and she saw again the whimsy and tenderness in his wide mouth.

"I—I guess I've been a fool, darlin'," he said, "but if any man ever hurt you I reckon I'd want to kill him with my two hands. You mean that much to me, Rita."

Rita didn't know why she shivered. It was as if a cloud had slipped over the sun in that moment, hiding its warmth.

"Cold, little Rita?" Gently Matt reached out, drew her close against him, and his hands held infinite tenderness as he brushed the night-black curls back from the sweet, alluring face. "I don't want you to be cold, ever, nor in need, nor unhappy."

She felt the swirl of tears in her throat. "Then you do understand, Matt . . . why I've got to go?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, Rita." He seemed suddenly hesitant, and she saw that his lean cheeks were touched with scarlet, his brown eyes grave and humble. "Rita, darlin'," he said, "there's somethin' I've got to tell you. Your old home . . . when Angus wrote me about his trouble, I arranged with the bank to take it over. I couldn't tell Angus—stiff-necked as he was—but if he'd lived, I

had meant to get it back to him, some way."

All she could do was whisper "Matt—Matt!" in her soft voice.

"So your home is there for you, darlin'. It's all yours, now. I've fixed it that way."

"Oh, you're so good—good. But I couldn't, Matt! I—"

A new vibrance had crept into his voice. "Rita! You don't know what you are to me! I loved your mother, honey, and now she has come back to me—in you. You're all I've ever prayed for, hoped for, worked for. Dearest—oh, I know I've no right to say this . . . you're so young, so sweet! But if you'd let me try to make you happy, through the years to come . . . I'd try to make up for the difference in our age by doin' things for you . . . and lovin' you. If there's been another man, I'd not have spoken, Rita. But now . . . I'm askin' you to marry me!"

ALL thought was suspended, all time, as she stood there in the circle of his arms, looking up into his brown eyes, shining with the golden lamps of tenderness that glowed deep in his soul.

"I reckon it's all wrong!" He was speaking jerkily now. "I'm twenty years older'n you, Rita. But I love you. I'd give my life to make you happy. And we'll go back to the ranch, sweet, live there where there's green grass and far spaces—if that's the way you'd like it. Or we could travel. I've money enough to give you anything. Rita, darlin'—Rita!"

She was silent for a long moment, looking up into Matt's face. She knew that the deep, strong lines were etched there by suffering. Matt, living through all these years, with a heartache like the one she carried. The woman he loved had married another. Now, in Rita, he had found afresh some of the joy of the old love. She could keep that joy alive; could bring a happiness to Matt that might make up for the past. At least, one person could be happy.

Her eyes were blue as a midnight sky, against the whiteness of her face. "Matt, would it be worth it—worth giving up your work here, changing your whole life?"

"Worth it!" he echoed hoarsely. "Worth it, Rita? Do you think any price too big to pay—to get rid of a heaviness that's been in my heart for more than twenty years? Bein' able to call you mine, would be worth any price, darlin'. And wherever you are . . . there will be my home!"

She drew a long breath. "All right, Matt. And we'll go back to the ranch—right away?"

His hands tightened convulsively upon hers. "Right away," he said, "if you'll marry me—now."

"Whenever you wish, Matt," she said, her voice low.

When Matt's arm's closed about her, tenderly, there was a deep sense of comfort, of being protected. And while his lips, gentle against her own, brought no thrill, the kiss seemed to carry balm against the awful hurt that was within her.

Still holding her close, Matt murmured, "You said—any time I wished. Rita. You mean that?"

She nodded. "Yes, Matt."

He laughed. "But I'd be sayin' tomorrow, darlin'. Even so soon after your father's death, I'd say tomorrow. For Angus would be glad, and I—" there was a boyish, joyous look on his face as he gazed down at her—"I won't be able to believe it till it's true. I wouldn't dare leave the house, for fear you'd run away. So if I had the say—"

"Any time you wish, Matt!" And she smiled at the light in his face.

She had dim thought of her mock-marriage to Jode, then thrust it from

her mind. That had been no marriage. Sometime she would tell Matt about it . . . sometime when his face wasn't quite so filled with new-found joy and glory.

CHAPTER FIVE

Heartbreak Wedding Night

THE marriage was set for Saturday, three days away. When Matt told his sister, she scolded him sharply. "No fool like an old fool!" she snapped, but she brushed and pressed his clothes, and helped Rita make ready.

It was Hercules Orlinger who learned the real acid of Aunt Pleasant's tongue. Every time he dared set foot in the kitchen, on some trumped-up errand, she turned on him stormily.

"You clumsy galoot! Trompin' mud all over my floor—"

"Now, Plessie, I cleaned my feet all nice," came his apologetic rumble.

"Call me a liar, will you? I'm sick of the sight of you! Get out—if you don't want a broom laid on your back!"

"Plessie, it's jest all this marryin' has teched your nerves! If ye'd listen to reason, Plessie, and jine up with me—"

"Join with you! A gamblin', cavortin' viper! You dare ask a decent, respectable female to live in evil with you—"

"No, ma'am!" Hercules choked in indignation. "I'm aimin' to wed you, all proper, and I'll bet you a month's pay—"

"I said—*get!*" Two red spots glowed on Aunt Pleasant's high cheekbones as she reached for the broom.

Hercules started hastily for the door. Outside, he grinned at Rita. "Blasted if I don't believe she's gettin' conviction!" he said.

They were arguing again when Matt and Rita drove away to town. They were still at it when the newlyweds came back that evening, but Hercules had dressed up in his store clothes, and Aunt Pleasant had put on her best Sunday taffeta. The table was set with a festive air, and there was feast-day food—fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, canned tomatoes, jellies, preserves.

"As good a weddin' supper as we could scare up on such short notice!" Aunt Pleasant said, after the greetings. "Serves you right, for not givin' a body time!"

"That's the way to work it!" roared little Hercules. "No time to fuss. I'll bet even money—" He wilted under Aunt Pleasant's stare.

There was gaiety among the four of them, after that. Rita saw Matt's happy pride, his glowing face. So she forced her lovely red lips to a curve. If her blue eyes shone more brightly than usual, beneath the crown of black hair, nobody realized that the brightness came from the tears she was fighting back; tears that were dropping into her heart, like clods into an open grave.

The meal ended, at last, and the wedding cake was cut and eaten. Aunt Pleasant went into the kitchen to oversee the after-supper work. Matt stood up, smiled down at Rita.

"I'm goin' over to the mine with Herk for a while," he said. "Got to make sure no men go down to the fifteen-thousand tunnel. We've just about broken through into the old Susy Bell, and some of the poison gas is seepin' through."

She nodded, and the two men left. But somehow, with his going, it was as if Matt took her strength along with him. She caught up a shawl, slipped out to the shadowy porch, leaned against a post and looked out upon the tumbled world below her.

There was a pale moon in the sky; a young-girl sort of moon, that seemed to have come forth to play with the stars as they laughed and swirled about it. As Rita watched, one star left the others, went rocketing across the sky, leaving a trail of light. . . .

She saw him, then, coming up the porch steps. Had her eyes been closed, so she couldn't have seen the silhouette of his tall, easy moving figure, her heart would have told her by its wild beating.

"Gary!"

HER leaping pulse made the cry breathless. Her eyes were larkspur-blue with joy, her lovely cheeks rose-pink as she turned toward him. Her mouth was a quivering flower. "Gary!"

He stopped, then whirled, took two strides toward her. She stumbled to meet him, knowing only that hurt and bitterness were gone, that Gary's arms were open—wide open—and that she was slipping into them.

With a husky breathing of her name, Gary jerked her close against him, this time roughly, demandingly, taking her love without further words.

His lips on hers were hard, sweetly cruel . . . but she loved the very pain of them. His arms were cruel, too, but she pressed even closer, drinking in the dreamed-of ecstasy of his love, as his heart hammered against her own. Those arms made her world: a world of swirling stardust, of mellow moonlight, of kisses. There was nothing else, anywhere, save her mad desire for Gary, the burning emotion that was demanding its fill.

Gary's lips were a flame, moving over the white, chiseled purity of her face. His eyes were worshiping, humble — and proud.

"Rita!" he said, after a long time. "Rita! I had to come back! I had—"

Footsteps were coming swiftly up the path from the gate. A tall figure, moving jubilantly, gladly, with the moonlight shining on his gray-sprinkled auburn hair —Matt Gale.

Rita drew away from Gary quickly. She stood waiting, as Marie Antoinette must have waited, in her last moment, for the knife to fall. Only, with Rita, there would be no quick severing of all feeling, no end to suffering. She must go on . . . and on. . .

"Gary!" Matt saw them as he came on the porch "They said at the office you'd ridden in, but I didn't believe it! But here you are!" He came forward, took Gary's hand in a hearty grip of welcome.

Something tightened in Rita's throat at sight of the strong affection between Matt Gale and his nephew, and a hurt was there when she saw Matt glance at her . . . with the love in his face.

He reached out an arm, drew Rita to him. "Gary, my boy," he said huskily, "I've a great piece of news for you. . . . Rita and I were married this afternoon."

THE words seemed to drop into a deep, ugly pool, sending ripples of despair surging out. For a long instant Gary's gaze held Rita's. As truly as if it had been a thing of stone and mortar, she saw the barrier rising between her heart and Gary's—a barrier that seemed almost built of hatred.

Aunt Pleasant came hurrying out, and there were more greetings, a lot of talk. They moved inside, and Gary went over to the fireplace, leaned against the mantle.

Matt still kept his arm about Rita, and from its shelter, she looked at Gary, at the dearly familiar face that had been etched forever upon her heart. It was thinner now; the cheeks were drawn skin-tight over the strong, fine bones. The brown eyes were set in deep sockets, as if they had forgotten the comfort of sleep. Those eyes came to Rita now, and she gave a little gasp . . . for in their weary depths flamed the tawny lights of accusation, and anger, and the shadow of a great hurt.

"Gary!" She felt as if she had to make him understand, no matter who heard. "Gary!"

Matt drew her closer, went on talking.

"Reckon it's taken you by surprise, Gary," he said, "but it's the happiest day of my life. And it's goin' to work out for your good, too. I'm turnin' the management of the whole mine over to you as soon as I can get things in shape. You and Emily can have the house here. Rita and I are goin' away."

A deep silence, then Gary spoke in tones that sounded dead, yet very clear. "Thanks, Uncle Matt. I—I wish you happiness. All the happiness in the world." He held out his hand.

"I reckon you and Emily'll be marryin', too, very soon," Matt went on. "She's gettin' ready to go away with you."

"Yes, we'll be married soon," Gary returned, in the same flat tones. "I'll go down there, right away."

There was no need. The door opened, and Emily came in. With a little cry, she threw herself into Gary's arms, her long silver and gold curls making a pale nimbus against his coat. Gary's arms went about her, and with one hand he stroked her hair.

Rita turned her eyes away. It made her own longing surge forth in one throbbing ache for Gary's arms, for Gary's lips.

"Gary!" Emily's voice was bird-like. "Gary, I heard you were here, and I hurried over!" She laughed. "Silly boy! To come for me, after all! Did you think—" The endless chatter would have gone on forever, it seemed to Rita, but Matt broke in gently.

"Emily, girl, you haven't heard the news yet. It's big news."

"What is it?" she asked. "What's happened?"

"Something very nice," Matt laughed. "Rita became my wife this afternoon."

Strangely, Emily's face whitened, save for a red spot of anger glowing on either cheek. She whirled to Rita, spoke through clenched white teeth.

"You cheat! You married him . . . to get his money! I told you he'd leave millions—for Gary and me! And you dared—"

"To get what you was after!" Aunt Pleasant's voice cut in, thin as a lash. "Well, you got your come-uppance, young lady! Rita and Matt'll likely have a passel of young'uns to waste what he's earned. Our pa was a heap older'n Matt is now when Matt was borned. It'll be good for you and Gary to earn your own vittels!"

Emily's tears came then, washing down the small white face, as she turned to Gary. "Rita's a cheat! She spoiled our lives—"

"Emily—don't! That isn't so!" Gary stared at her, aghast.

"It's the truth! She wanted to hurt us!"

"STOP it!" Matt thundered, and silence fell into the room. Then, more gently: "You're overwrought, Emily. You don't know what you're sayin'. Rita's my wife—by my choice. Please remember that. As for Gary . . . were you marryin' him for what you thought you'd get—or because you love him?"

"Why—I love him, of course!" Emily stammered. "Only—"

"Then don't worry!" Matt flashed her a quick smile. "We'll forget all this. I'm makin' you a weddin' present that'll prove there's enough for us all."

Gary spoke, then. "I'm sorry, Uncle Matt. So is Emily. All we want is—your happiness," But he said it in those dead, dry tones. "We're goin' now, to make plans for our own early weddin'."

And when they had left, to make those wedding plans, Rita felt as if the moon had drawn behind a cloud, forever; as if the stars had turned cold, and there was no light, no warmth.

Aunt Pleasant spoke up crisply. "I've had enough of this marriage business,"

she said out tartly. "I'm goin' to bed."

She flounced out of the room, and sudden panic filled Rita. She stood there, motionless, not daring to look at Matt. She was aware that he was putting out the lamps, all except one that he left for Gary. Then he came over and put his arm about her, led her gently into the hall.

Before the room that had been hers, he stopped, looked down at her. Lifting her head to meet his gaze, she saw that he was very grave, that his eyes held shadows again.

"You're tremblin', darlin'," he said, low-voiced. "You're that afraid—of me?"

"I—don't know, Matt," she whispered. "I—"

He put his arms about her and drew her close, held her for a long moment, then released her.

"Don't worry, sweet," he said, huskily. "As long as there's any dread in your eyes, we'll be—just good friends. I couldn't have it any other way."

She felt his lips on her forehead, and a great pity and a great hurt welled up within her; pity and hurt for Matt. She put her arms about his neck and lifted her soft, luring lips to his.

"You're so good, Matt!" she said, tensely. "So good! Oh, I wish—"

"Hush!" he said. "Hush, little darlin'—hush!"

CHAPTER SIX

Moonlight Betrayal

IT WAS daylight when Gary came home. Rita, lying awake in bed, hadn't realized she was waiting for Gary, but the deep wave of relief that flooded her made her know that she had. Now, for a few hours, she wouldn't have to believe Gary was with Emily, planning their wedding. For a few brief hours, she could find a little peace . . .

Rita busied herself as best she could through the day, trying to keep from thinking, from remembering how Gary's red head looked with the sun gleaming on it. Trying to forget how warm and sweet Gary's arms were about her, how precious his mouth against hers. Most of all, trying to forget that soon he would be married to another girl—that a double barrier would be between them.

Sunset, at last, and Matt coming home for supper—without Gary. "He's gone to Emily's," he explained, in answer to a question from Aunt Pleasant. "They've set the weddin' ahead to next Wednesday night, and Emily's gettin' ready to trim the whole house, so Gary'll be busy 'twixt now and then. And I reckon it's as well," he sighed.

Rita leaned toward him, as Aunt Pleasant went back for more coffee. "Matt, I know it hurts you about—Gary not liking me, but—"

He patted her hand, smiled warmly. "That isn't it, darlin'. Gary'll be thinkin' a heap of you, when he grows to know your sweetness. But right now . . . I'm glad Gary's bein' kept busy, these nights. The gas is still seepin' from the old Susy Bell into the lower levels of the Driftin' Burro, and if Gary was around he might decide to go down there and take a look-see. He's a reckless young cuss."

She looked at Matt, startled. "You won't go down, Matt? You won't run any risk?" Her eyes were blue and wide.

"Don't worry, honey. It'll be taken care of, without me. And Rita, darlin'—I've wanted to tell you. There's a safe in my room. The combination is 2—29—6. If you want to buy some new clothes, help yourself, and dig deep. All I've got is yours, sweet."

"Thanks, Matt!" He was so dear, this tall man who loved her.

"I've got to go back a while tonight, though I won't be long. Herk is takin' Pleasant over to the schoolhouse meetin'."

. . . His tone changed suddenly. "I don't like leavin' you alone, darlin'."

"I'm not afraid," she smiled, as he kissed her gently.

Not afraid, but lonely—terribly lonely, as she sat before the leaping flames of the hearth. She had no right to feel this way, she told herself; no right to discount Matt's dearness, his kindness. But scolding herself didn't matter; all that mattered was her desperate longing for Gary. . . . Her need to drive him—and the forbidden thoughts of his love—forever out of her memory.

She jerked up her dark, shining head as a step sounded on the porch. For an instant her heart thudded madly, and a golden pulse leaped in her throat. She walked to the door, opened it, stood there, trying to see through the darkness. Then the man stepped into the light, smiled at her, and the golden pulse died. The glad little feeling scurried away, like daylight slipping before the stalking night shadows.

"Jode!"

FOR it was Jode Cannon, his fair crop of curls shining, his round, handsome face dimpling as he smiled at her. "Hello, Rita, darlin'" he said, easily. "Didn't expect to see your husband so soon again, did you?"

"Hush!" she cried. It seemed such a terrible thing to be spoken, here in Matt's home. "Hush! It isn't true! There was no marriage—none that was legal. You were already married—"

He laughed. "Maybe I told you that to comfort you, baby, so you wouldn't feel too bad about me walkin' out that way. It was a mighty mean thing to do, but I was sort o' desperate."

Rita stared at him, dizzy under the sickening fear that clutched her. "Why did you come?"

He shrugged, looked around cunningly. "Listen, honey. We oughtn't to talk here. Matt Gale might be comin' home, any time. Get somethin' around you, and let's walk down the trail a ways—you'd better come!" he clipped sharply, as she shook her head. "Unless you want that old fool that's married you to be the laughin' stock of the country!"

Matt—made ridiculous! Matt, so fine and proud . . . Rita could see how that would be. If what Jode said were true, Matt's story would spread all over the country. Marrying a young girl who was another man's wife—a week after her first marriage! No fool like an old fool, they would say—and laugh.

"I'll come," she told Jode.

In a quiet spot, a little off the trail, Rita faced him. "Now have your say, and be done with it!"

He shrugged. "You ought to know the situation, Rita. Here I play my bride a mean trick by leavin' her, and then I'm plumb sorry. I follow her, wantin' to kiss and make up; come up here and find she's married herself to an old fossil that's lousy with dough. An old—"

"Hush that!" she flared. "Matt's good—kind—"

"Sure he is! That's why it'll be easy to get me some of his dough—to pay for losin' my dear little woman!"

"Get Matt's money—*for you?*"

"Sure. A wad of dough ain't much to pay for an old man's peace of mind."

"You mean—" utter scorn was in her blue, blue eyes. "—that you expect me to *buy* your silence?"

"You got it right, honey. Pay me, and I'll clear out. Otherwise, you've got two husbands to account for, and I reckon that'll be somethin', even in this jumpin'-off-place. Matt Hale can visit his make-believe bride in jail!" Jode laughed with oily softness.

"But Jode—oh, you said there was no marriage! That—"

"It'll be your word against mine. Suppose I say you left me . . . when you

found I was flat-busted? Where'll that put the old bridegroom?"

Rita didn't answer. She was seeing the starlit world through a blue void of tears, a maze of dizziness, as realization struck her. She had believed that the marriage wasn't legal . . . had waited to tell Matt, because it didn't seem to matter, and she didn't want to mar his happiness. But now, Jode was here, ready to hurt Matt.

"I'm going to tell Matt," she said levelly, "and he'll kill you."

"A lot that'll help him," Jode scoffed, and his gray-green eyes were slitted. "I'm mighty quick on the draw . . . mebby you'd forgot that."

Yes, she had forgotten. She'd been proud, back there when she was fifteen, and the ranch-boys told her of Jode's quickness on the draw. A gunny, they called him. A gun-slick, from mining country. And now—

"If any man hurt you, ever, I'd want to kill him—" Matt had said.

"There's only the one way out," Jode rasped, in her ear. "Pay me, and I'll clear out. I want to try some minin' below the border."

Rita considered, swiftly. If Jode would go—without trouble—then she could tell Matt, and she'd go away. There would be no disgrace, then, for Matt; no chance for Matt to kill, or be killed.

"How much do you want?" she asked, huskily.

Jode licked his lips. "Five thousand," he said. "That ain't much—for givin' up my wife, but it'll give me a start."

Rita stared at him. Five thousand! Where—? Then she remembered the safe. "Dig deep," Matt had said. And once she got Jode away, she would tell Matt. Matt would understand.

"I'll get it," she said, and turned away.

Jode's hand stopped her. "Not now, angel! After all, I'm entitled to a kiss, after not seein' you for a week!" Before she could breathe, he had jerked her into his arms, was holding her close.

She tried to struggle, but it was of no use. Jode's arms were like a vise about her, holding her close against him. His mouth clamped down upon hers to still her words of fury; a kiss that sent sickening waves of revulsion circling through her veins, that made her want to claw at Jode—kill him!

"There!" he said, low, after a long, long time. "That'll do me for a while." Then, "Bring the little love-gift to me here, at midnight, darlin'. And don't be late!"

Rita stumbled up the path. At the gate, she paused, saw Jode still standing there in the moonlight, smoking, staring toward the mines. She shivered, turned—to find herself looking into Gary's face.

"Gary!" she whispered in a choked tone, so tight was her throat, so filled with the golden pulse that beat there. "Gary!"

He didn't answer, and some of the blur cleared from her eyes; she saw then the ashen gray of his face, the tight line of his mouth. And his eyes— The whole world rocked as she glimpsed those brown eyes, hard with anger and contempt.

"Gary!" she choked out again. "Gary—what—?"

His gaze went past her, down the path to Jode, who still stood there, smoking, and suddenly Rita understood. The moonlight was so bright.

"You saw," she said in a flat tone. "Saw—"

"My uncle's bride in the arms of another man!" Gary's voice was like the rasp of a saw on iron. "Saw him kiss her—love her—"

"Gary—oh!" She put her hand upon his arm. "You've got to listen, Gary! I—" she stopped, suddenly, for how could she explain—yet? "Gary, you've got to believe in me, trust me!"

He shook her hand from his arm. "Don't try to deceive me!" he gritted. "It's enough that Uncle Matt has to stay blind!" His eyes were almost red in their hotness, as he looked down at her. "I won't tell him," he said, "but you keep out of my way as long as you're here! Out of my sight. . . . I never want to see you again."

She swayed, but the ebon head was proudly held.

"All right, Gary," she said. "All right." From somewhere, she found strength to walk straight, to move up the porch steps without faltering, and into the house.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Love's Battle Reunion

RITA walked in a terrible dream, but her thoughts moved with queer precision. She mustn't, she realized, let those thoughts go to Gary; Gary, whose brown eyes were filled with contempt. Gary, who despised her. She just had to keep going; had to get Jode Cannon away, before he and Matt met. Then she would tell Matt, and she would go away—far away. That was the only sense of peace she could get . . . picturing herself going on and on, away from the hate in Gary's eyes.

The safe was in Matt's office, and she must get the money before he came back. Carefully she recalled the combination, worked it, and the door swung open. Five thousand. She counted it carefully, shut the safe, took the money into her bedroom to hide under her pillow. The front door opened, and she heard Matt's jovial voice.

"Rita, darlin', where are you?"

"Here!" She returned to the sitting-room, stopped dead-still when she saw Gary with him.

"You always look slick as a whistle,
What can I do for my tough bristle?"
"The Thin Gillette will end your trouble
With thrift and ease it whisks off stubble"
Precision made to fit your Gillette Razor exactly!
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10c
8 for 19c
The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

Gary was speaking. "We can't send any of the men below ten thousand feet, till we get the Susy Bell cleaned out. Too dangerous."

"I'll go down in the mornin'," Matt said. "If the wall between the two mines was blasted—"

"You stay out!" Gary said firmly. "That's a job for younger men. I—" he stopped as he saw Rita, and again that look of hardness came over his face.

"Rita!" Matt hadn't noticed the tension between these two he loved most. "Listen, honey, I gave a job to that friend of yours tonight. He says he's a blastin' expert."

"A job . . . my friend?"

"Jode Cannon. He came to the office tonight, said you used to be good friends. A friend of Angus, too."

Rita filled with quick fear. Jode—taking a job. Planning to stay here. She knew a sudden surge of anger, then sickening dismay, as Gary's gaze came.

She lifted her head. Courage lay in her blue eyes like a badge. "Thank you Matt—for so much!" she said, in even quiet tones. "I'm a little tired. I think I'll go to bed."

"Of course, dear!" Matt came over, held her close for a moment, then brushed a kiss gently on her forehead.

But there was no sleep for Rita. She put the money back in Matt's safe, and breathed a sigh of thankfulness. Jode would get none of Matt's money. . . . She was glad of that. She'd been a coward—for herself, for Matt. Now fear was gone; only anger against this man who dared bring shame to Matt.

Hours dragged on. She heard the clock strike ten . . . the half hour . . then eleven . . . and another half hour. She waited until the clock struck twelve before she got up, drew a shawl about her, slipped down the hall and through the outside door.

Jode came to meet her. "Right on time, my sweet!" he laughed.

He held out his hands, but she stopped, her face white with anger. "You lied to me," she said levelly. "You said you'd go away, yet you asked Matt for a job!"

HE SHRUGGED wide shoulders, laughed. "You didn't really want me away, honey," he chided. "A nice lookin' husband, who knows how to make love, and is willin' to keep his mouth shut. We can share the old man's money."

"You—oh, you beast!" she panted. "Do you think I'd do that? I'm going to tell Matt, do you hear? I was going to wait till you'd gone away, so there'd be no disgrace for him, no danger, but Matt's no coward. I'll tell him, now!"

"He'll like hearin' it," Jode said calmly. "Like knowin' that you tricked me into marryin' you, because his nephew turned you down."

"You said you loved me, wanted to take care of me," she said tensely, "even after I told you I loved someone else! That's why I married you. . . . Then when you found out I was penniless, you said the marriage wasn't legal, that you already had a wife over Pecos way. And when you couldn't make me give you Matt's money, you walked away and left me. You knew I thought it was no marriage, but now you appear and want me to steal from Matt for you. . . . To keep you from making Matt a laughing-stock all over the country. Well, I won't do it! Matt has the right to know, and I'll—"

"You'll do nothin'—except be a good girl, and do what I ask. Right now, I'm hungry for my wife—a little lovin'—"

He reached out, caught her, and there was that in his greenish eyes—glowing like a cat's in the wan moonlight—and in his panting breath that sent sheer terror surging through Rita. She fought desperately. Her breath came out in a single heart-deep cry.

"Gary!"

Gary was there. Even as she called, she saw his long, lithe figure hurtling from the shadows.

Jode's curse came thickly, then Gary's fist hammered out, and Jode's big body reeled. But only for a moment; then he came in again, swearing, fists lashing Gary.

Rita huddled back, watching, for the moon rode cold and high now, through banks of scudding clouds. Gary was being forced back by the larger man. She saw the tree-root behind Gary too late.

Jode went down with him, and the two were rolling on the ground, in a welter of flailing, threshing limbs.

Despite Gary's clutching fingers, Jode was slowly bringing down his gun arm, sighting for Gary's head. Rita tried to get close enough to reach the six-gun, but the threshing bodies of the men prevented her. Gary called, "Keep back, Rita, darlin'! Please!"

Darlin'! . . . In spite of her fear, her heartache, Rita knew a wild surge of joy. This she would have to remember, through all the days to come. *Darlin'!*

Then she caught her breath, for Gary had suddenly loosed his hold on Jode's gun-arm, drawn back his arm swiftly, and sent his fist crashing forward. It hit just under Jode's unprotected chin.

Gary was on his feet. He picked up the gun and tossed it away. Then he turned, held out his arms.

Rita walked into them; walked into them with the glad cry of a lost child who sights its home.

HE LOOKED into her face, the rich liquid brown eyes alive with golden exuberant fires. "Rita, Rita!" he choked. "How cruel I was to doubt you!"

"Gary!" She looked up into his face. "There was no hope for us. And I wanted to make Matt happy; he's so good."

"He's all of that," Gary returned. "But I didn't understand, at first. I'd been tryin' to make Emily understand. I wrote to her . . . said I loved somebody else, and asked her to release me. She sent word she was comin' to me, to be married there. Still I couldn't accept it. I felt it was unfair to offer her only the shell of a heart. So I came home, to make her see that she couldn't be happy like that, and I found you . . . married."

Rita trembled in the circle of his arms. "There's nothing we can do, Gary," she whispered. "I've got to go away."

"No. You can't run away, darlin'!" Gary returned firmly. "I'll force the truth from this rat tomorrow, then I'll go down Pecos way, and investigate. If he has a wife, then your marriage to him wasn't legal, and you're wed to Matt. If not . . . then we can arrange everything quietly for you to be freed. When that's done, we'll tell Matt!"

"But Matt can't know about us!" she cried. "He can't, Gary! My mother broke his heart once."

"I know, sweet!" Gary's big hand smoothed the dark hair back from her forehead. "Matt must never know about us. We both owe that to him—and I'm ashamed of my jealousy back there. If we have to tell him about Jode, he'll understand, and the two of you can be married again—!"

"Gary!" Rita's rich voice throbbed with pain. "Gary! This has to be goodbye!"

"No!" Gary shook with his attempt to hold himself steady. "Never again, Rita!"

She threw her arms about his neck, in a frenzy from the wild, trembling passion that poured through each tiny pulse. "Gary!" she breathed. "Gary, since this is goodbye, then hold me close for a minute. Kiss me!"

A groan escaped his lips as his arms tightened, convulsively, holding her so close that she was aware of the wild throbbing of his body.

"Goodbye, darlin'," he said. "Go

quickly." Then, because he knew the talk had to be brought to earthly things, suddenly, to keep them from each other's arms again, he went on. "I'll carry this jasper up and lock him in the supply shed, behind my office. Then, when he comes to, I'm goin' to get the truth out of him before I personally conduct him away from here!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sun-up in Paradise

RITA walked slowly toward the house, moving in a dark dream. And yet —as she went, she knew that in the innermost altar of her heart, a candle had been lighted; a golden-flamed candle that would warm her, always, though it burned at a secret shrine.

She turned and smiled through her tears at Gary, whose shadowy figure with its burden, was walking up the path to the supply shed. As if he felt her gaze, he turned, managed to wave, then went on.

Neither noticed the figure of the middle-aged man who had been been standing in the shadows ever since he saw Rita leaving the house, and had followed to protect her. Matt's figure was bent and suddenly old.

"Gary and Rita," he whispered to the stars. "Of course!" He was dazed.

The daze left him after a few minutes, and he could plan. There was no pain in his splendid brown eyes when he finally stood up, walked along the path toward his office. Beneath his feet the world seemed to throb . . . the night shift digging out more gold for him, perhaps . . . as if gold could buy happiness.

In his office, he wrote briefly, addressed a packet to Emily Boling. "It was a blow to Emily, my marryin' Rita," he told himself. "It made her afraid Gary wouldn't inherit enough. But this money—it will dry her tears better than marriage. And folks'll think it was meant for a weddin' gift."

He smiled, then made up another packet, addressed it "Mr. and Mrs. Hercules Orlinger."

It was almost dawn when he walked to the small storeroom behind Gary's office. He stopped in the doorway, stared at the battered Jode Cannon. Gary had done a good job, working the man over.

"So you're the blackmailer," Matt said. "And it looks as if my nephew had taken the wrong track with you."

"He has!" Jode cursed. "I'm goin' to get even! I'll spread Rita's story over the whole country! And I'll come back! I'll get even!"

"Yes," Matt nodded. "Gary took the wrong way. Now if I'd seen you first, I'd have handled it differently." Then, abruptly: "If I pay enough, will you clear out and stay out?"

Jode's eyes flickered. "Yes."

Matt came closer. "If I took you down with me to the place where I keep my gold stashed, and let you take away all you can carry—even all you can pack on a horse—would you promise to leave Rita alone?"

Matt well knew the thoughts that flashed through Jode's crooked mind. "What, you old fool! Once I've found where you stash your gold . . . and know that I can fill my pockets every time I come back . . . then you think I'll stay away? All I can carry! . . . pack off on a horse! Nuggets. Gold bars, perhaps. . . . You *are* an old fool!"

But Jode's lips said: "Sure, I'll clear out. All I want is a little dough."

Matt cut the bonds that held Jode. "Come on," he said.

They walked through the glory of dawn toward the mine entrance; through a world of glorious, breath-taking beauty. Matt's eyes glowed with the sweetness of it. His face shone. Part of his heartache, through the years, had been that

he could not serve the first Rita he loved; now he was having all that made up to him in one brief glorious hour. Only once did his face grow wistful—when he stopped to look back toward the house where the second Rita was sleeping.

He motioned Jode to get into the cage ahead of him. Matt stepped to the door of the watchman's shack. "Did they take the things down to the fifteen-thousand level—ready for blasting through into the Susy Bell?" he asked.

The watchman nodded. "And things are bad down there," he said. "Ain't nobody could stay down there more'n three minutes. It's goin' to be plenty tough, gettin' that blast set off."

"It isn't right for any of the men to risk their lives," Matt said. "Men with families, boys with their mothers and sweethearts . . ."

He came back and stepped into the cage.

They went slowly downward. Two thousand feet . . . three . . . four. At five thousand feet, Matt suddenly kicked the brake, and the cage went hurtling like a falling rocket . . . down . . . down. . . .

ABOVE, the gray-faced group stared at one another; they had come running at the first blast of the emergency whistle.

"Rope's loose," Hercules Orlinger muttered, for perhaps the tenth time. "Broke. Takes time to fix it and bring the cage up . . . and nobody can live down there more'n three minutes with all that poison."

"But he set off the blast," the watchman mumbled. "I should have knowed what he meant to do when he said it warn't right for the men to risk their lives. Should have knowed. Seems like he had a hunch things would go wrong . . . the rope breakin', and all. But he didn't know, or he wouldn't have been takin' that new feller down. . . ."

Gary's eyes were as damp as Matt's had been as he went up to the house to meet Rita

"Gary! Gary!" she sobbed. "Matt gave Jode a job, to please me! And because Jode claimed to be a blasting expert—"

Gary's arms closed protectively about her. "Matt woudn't ask him to go into the danger that he couldn't face, himself," he said. "He would rather it happened this way, than for some other man to lose his life!"

"He was so dear," she whispered.

There was no big wedding at the ranchhouse; no crowd of guests, that next month. There was just the parson and the four of them: Rita and Gary, Mr. and Mrs. Hercules Orlinger, for Aunt Pleasant had given in at last.

"Matt wanted it," Pleasant said. "Else he wouldn't have been puttin' aside a nest egg for us. Addressed to us—and most likely it was layin' there through the years, waitin' for us to get married!"

"And I ain't never goin' to bet another dime!" Hercules boomed virtuously. "Never once!"

"Huh!" Aunt Pleasant snapped. "I'll bet the last cooky in the jar that you'll—" She bit off her words, glared at her new diminutive husband—and, with gentle fingers, straightened his tie.

Just the four of them . . . And yet, as the parson pronounced them man and wife, it seemed to Rita that there were other loved guests. Her own mother, young and smiling. Matt, looking at her so tenderly, his brown eyes aglow.

Sun-up was here, she knew, as she turned to Gary, lifted her lips for the bridal kiss. Sun-up . . . It was a new beginning, new hope, and a glory greater than the dawn.

THE END

RUNAWAY'S HONEYMOON DEADLINE

By Jacqueline West

ALOYSIUS McNULTY, known as Little Mac by all in Dry Gulch, rode the tiller of No. 6 nozzle like a monarch.

Tons of water roared from the steel mouth of the pipe line. The great stream arched high or low, at the discretion of the sturdy little man with grizzled hair and red, seamed face who fought the kick of the long beam, directing the nozzle.

At a gesture from this king in hip boots and slicker, great rocks, high up on the canyon wall, leaped skyward and tons of earth thundered down. Another gesture sent watery demons boring straight into the world's bowels. This was Little Mac's daily work—washing out the low grade paystreak that earned millions for Hydro's stockholders. No man washed as much dirt as he.

McNulty women and Moulton men must never marry, by the law of feud. . . . Could blue-eyed Lottie McNulty fool a preacher, a sheriff and two embattled fathers to beat a runaway's honeymoon deadline?

"Stop! I forbid this wedding!" Lottie's father clumped up the aisle.

Wrestling with his steel monster, Little Mac squinted shrewd eyes at the sun, then at the whistle atop the engine shack high above on the gulch's rim. A plume of steam curled up, its scream unheard amidst the thundering of six hydraulics. Little Mac waved his arm and his helper bent his shoulders to the shut-off wheel. The roar ceased, the stream became a dirty dribble and Little Mac waved again in greeting to a girlish figure limned against the blazing blue sky. Lottie was on time with the lunch pail.

Climbing the ladders out of the gulch, Little Mac's thoughts were busy with Lottie. A fine girl, she was, and one to do the McNultys proud! She had her mother's black hair and blue eyes, beauty that would stir a mummied Pharaoh to life. And stubborness like a mule.

"She takes after her old man there," Lottie's father chuckled. "Only for that mulishness she'd be a saint, and what mortal man would want a saint to keep his house and bring up the brats?"

The proud father's head poked above the canyon's top and the fond smile gave way to alarm, and black rage. Unaware of his promptness, Lottie's slender figure swayed into the embrace of a tall, blond young man in mining engineer's rig. Dark eyes held the light of glorious surrender as her red lips merged with the triumphant kiss of the man she loved.

"Lottie!"

Her father's shout won him a hurried glance from the embracing couple then, with a toss of her head, Lottie turned back to her kissing.

"Lottie!"

Little Mac almost snarled the name. His hand on the girl's shoulder tore her from the other man.

"A McNulty kissing a Moulton," Little Mac rasped, "and the gulch full of decent boys that are aching to kiss you!" He whirled on the protesting young man. "You'll keep away from my girl, George Moulton, or be sorry. Your old man may be president of Hydro and boss of this town; you may live in your fine, big houses and wallow in your fripperies, but you're not for my girl. And I'll thank you to be gone—"

"He won't be gone," Lottie defied him. "Not until I tell him to—and I shan't tell him! I love him!"

"That's right, Mr. McNulty," George chimed in. "We love each other—"

LITTLE MAC made a sound of derision. The young man's color deepened.

"Why shouldn't I marry Lottie? I want you to know that I'm on my own now. I left my father's house. I got a job at Carmichael and I'm earning enough to support a wife."

"You're a Moulton," Lottie's father growled. "You can't deny that. I know the lot of you, for many's the time your old man and I got drunk together—before he went up in the world and began to lord it over old partners.

"You're a Moulton," he snapped, "and all Moultons look alike to me. I say you don't marry Lottie and that ends it, for without my consent you can't do it!" He made a shrill, triumphant crowing sound. "Lottie's not eighteen and she can't marry unless her old man gives consent. So now, kindly, you'll be on your way before I tear the Moulton lights and liver out of your useless, palpitating carcass!" Little Mac began to shuffle his feet like a bantam cock, scratching up the dust in anticipation of battle.

"Father!" Lottie screamed. Then, "George, go away. Please, George! I'll see you again and I'll love you every minute we're apart. But go quick."

"I guess I'd better," George groaned. "He's older than me, a lot. I can't hit an old man—"

A bellow from Little Mac; a sharper scream from Lottie, who clung to her

father. Then George was gone. Promptly Lottie dissolved into tempestuous tears, the surest way she knew of calming down the old man.

The sky was moonless, but brilliant with stars, every one sparkling like a diamond, when Lottie slipped away from the shack where her two brothers and three sisters slumbered. Pop was down in the town, helping support some bar or other. Her escape would be unchallenged.

George Moulton was waiting for her at their favorite meeting place, just above the gulch where the Hydro nozzles battered all day. She ran into his arms without a sound, and they clung together for a long time. There was no need of speech —this was her happiness. Lottie knew it with the sureness of a woman twice her years. Since school days she had loved George Moulton, and he had loved her. Other girls had tried to win him, and still tried. Other boys had attempted desperately to interest Lottie. But Lottie and George knew what they wanted—and were resolved to get it.

"Honey," he whispered, when speech was possible, "There's only one thing for us to do . . . marry. We've got to marry, then maybe our folks'll see reason. You're not afraid to risk it?"

"With you?" Lottie laughed fear to scorn. "Any time you say, George—any time!"

An interval of silence came, and their lips were too busy for speech. Then George, holding her by her slender shoulders, said, "I say tomorrow, Lottie. I've got to get back to my new job. I want to take my wife with me to Carmichael."

"Then tomorrow it is," Lottie whispered. "Oh . . . George!"

Plans were simple and quickly made. The Reverend Hugh Alfreston, sky pilot in Dry Gulch's little wooden church, was George's special pal. He agreed to perform the ceremony at ten o'clock.

"I had to lie about one thing, honey. Your age. Hugh said, 'Of course she's past eighteen?' Well . . . I didn't say you weren't. I didn't say anything, just grinned."

"The McNultys get good sense long before they're eighteen," Lottie announced. "We won't worry about it."

After that they talked of matters too personal to interest anybody, even the sallow-faced young man named Smykes, who had followed Lottie to this tryst.

Smykes was one of Lottie's rejected suitors, and the rejection stung his pride. His small soul was capable of just one idea—to humiliate the girl who had scorned him.

Smykes left the lovers absorbed in their beautiful scheme and summoned up courage for a call upon Big George Moulton. Big George, with huge chest and shoulders, stood over six feet. Like Little Mac he had once been a nozzleman for hydraulic mining companies, and his fists and rough tongue had helped him on his way to wealth and arrogance.

Wounded vanity will drive a coward to rash acts, as it did in the case of Smykes, the tale-bearer.

At 8 o'clock next morning, in hip boots and slicker, a rubber hat tied firmly under his chin, Little Mac kissed a strangely docile daughter and strode to his work.

At 9 o'clock Lottie had the kids off to school. At 10 o'clock of a fine, hot, cloudless day, she entered the unpainted little church that stood on a hill and was gathered into the embrace of a radiant bridegroom.

GEORGE turned to the young minister. "Not a minute to waste, Hugh. My father got word of our plans. Some rat spied on us last night and told him everything. He's coming here with a warrant for my arrest."

"You can't arrest a man for getting married!" argued the Reverend.

"You can arrest him for stealing a horse," George said bitterly. "Even if the charge is a lie. It was my own saddle horse that I took to my job in Carmichael. But my father's got the sheriff after me, just to break up this wedding—"

"You and Lottie walk straight up to the altar," Hugh directed.

"Dearly beloved," Hugh announced to the empty pews, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God—"

The church door burst open to admit a figure in slicker and boots. It was Little Mac, and he was out of breath. He could scarcely gasp, "Stop!"

"I forbid this wedding!" Lottie's father clumped up the aisle. "I'm the girl's father, and she's under age."

"Under age?" Hugh gasped, and looked reproachfully at the bridegroom. "I'm sorry, George, but if her father is right—"

Lottie burst into tears. "That's right. That's like you, father! Keep us here arguing about my age, and give George's father time to bring the sheriff here and arrest him for horse stealing!"

"Horse stealing, is it?" Little Mac laughed. "All Moultons are horse thieves, but why does the big pot call the little kettle black?"

"Because George's father forbade his marrying me, of course!"

"He forbids!"

"He thinks the Moultons are above marrying with the McNultys."

"He says I'm disgracing the family," George added.

"He says I'm shanty Irish," said Lottie and, looking over her father's head, winked at George.

"He says, Mr. McNulty, that he'd never hold up his head again if I married Lottie."

"He says you're to blame," said Lottie. "He's going to get even with you by keeping up apart." She smiled sadly.

Little Mac's angry eyes darted from one earnest young face to the other. His face got redder.

"I shouldn't think a smart man like you would let my father use him to do his dirty work," said young George.

Little Mac exploded. "Use me? Big George make a cat's paw out of me! I'll have you know it can't be done! You'll get married, you two. You hear me, Lottie? You marry this young fellow or you feel the back of my hand—"

"Then you don't object?" Hugh asked.

"Object, be damned!" Little Mac apologized to Hugh for the word. "It's just that I'm so flabbergasted by the nerve of Big George, claiming the McNultys ain't fit to marry Moultons. Ha! He'll not use me to stop true love!"

Hugh opened his prayer book. "Dearly beloved . . ." he began again.

Little Mac tiptoed down the aisle and peered out of the church door. "Hold everything," he shouted. "Big George is here with the sheriff, but never fear, there will be a wedding yet. Out the back way, all of you, and follow me."

Like fleeing conspirators they abandoned the church by the rear door, while the sheriff tried to get in at the front. Little Mac led the retreat across the hill. From the rear a shout told that they had been seen.

LIKE fox and hounds they streaked over the landscape until the sheer brink of the gulch halted escape.

"Down the ladders," Little Mac directed. "Down into the diggings. You can marry to your hearts content, down there where I'm the boss."

After them came the growing posse, Big George ahead of the lot.

Little Mac's bellow startled the loafing helper on No. 6. "Barney . . . give me full head!" His waving arm directed the bridal party. "Over here out of harm's way. Now, Reverend!"

At that moment Big George spoke for himself. "Stop!" he bellowed. He had topped a gravel mound and stood, with legs spread wide, a massive menace. "You can't marry 'em! The law—sheriff right here—warrant—"

"What say? I can't hear you." Little Mac, perched on the tiller of No. 6, made frantic gestures for water. "I can't hear you, George, but I can smell you."

"Sheriff," George bellowed. They could see his face redden, even at that distance. "Sheriff, serve that paper!"

"Reverend," said Little Mac, "get on with your holy work. And Barney . . ." His voice swelled in volume, "You wall eyed, lop-eared half-wit, I said WATER!"

Again Hugh opened his prayer book, his smile a benediction upon the pair standing before him. "Dearly beloved . . ." he read.

"W-A-T-E-R!" Barney roared.

VIOLENT indigestion rumbled through the winding steel pipe. A blast of air roared out of No. 6 and the earth shook. The scream of air deepened into the whooosh of roaring water, flying tons of it. The great stream arched higher . . . higher still. On the distant gravel mound there was an explosion, as if a shell had struck. Men leaped like goats at play, then men and mud became indistinguishable.

". . . which is an honorable estate instituted of God in the time of man's innocency," shouted Hugh. Bride, groom and minister bent their heads.

On the gravel mound, whence all but he had been washed away, Big George loomed, shaking his fist. Little Mac, riding the tiller, shook his fist in reply.

"Ay, stay there, old Rock of Ages and I'll wash you free of your sins!"

The watery barrage ripped the ground from under Big George's feet. Little Mac's triumphant crow echoed across the gulch.

Big George came on in spite of it and the monarch of No. 6 uttered a shrill cry of alarm. Suddenly he was helpless. The nozzle could be depressed only so far and the ground just below the mound where it stood could not be reached with the stream. Big George, scuttling like a giant crab, had reached the neutral terrain.

"Save it," yelled Little Mac and waved his arm to Barney. The stream dwindled to a muddy slobber.

"If any man can show just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together . . ."

Big George was running, erect now, racing to show just cause. Little Mac leaped off the idle tiller and rushed down the hill to defend true love.

"George, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?"

"I will," said George.

"Lottie, wilt thou have this man to be thy husband?"

"Yes," cried Lottie, trembling.

"Who giveth this woman—"

From the slope below, where gravel was flying, came her father's bellow, "I give her—and be damned to any man who says she can't marry him."

Big George was coming fast, his long legs sending the mud and gravel flying. Between the two was a creek, the drainings of six nozzles that washed the gulch. A single plank bridge spanned it. The recent barrage from No. 6 had undermined one end of that plank, a fact that neither man had time to notice.

Little Mac was on the plank before he saw that his foe had set foot from the opposite end, a fact he learned by the violent slueing of the bridge.

Two substantial fists swung in one simultaneous, sledge-hammer blow—and missed. The plank tilted and they slid into the roaring, brown tide together.

Little Mac came up first, straddled among the rolling gravel and looked for a head to punch. Big George was gone.

Down stream he saw a man's arm projecting above the current. Then that was gone.

"Come back, you coward, and take your licking," Mac bellowed, but only a billowing coat marked Big George's progress. He had struck his head on a rock. He was drowning.

Little Mac tore off his slicker and kicked free of his boots. His breast stroke was sturdy, and his progress swift, but he had time to remember a lot of things about Big George Moulton—tight spots they had faced together, hard times they had shared. . . .

Ahead of Mac, a huge body bobbed up, face down in the current. He pounced, got hold of a coat collar and braked his progress on the treacherous gravel. Like a great sack, he dragged the president of Hydro to the bank, rolled him empty of water and massaged the back of his neck violently, until Big George lurched out with futile blows, and began to abuse him with hearty barroom oaths.

"You'll do," Little Mac crowed joyously. "You'll do fine with a stiff drink." He dragged his own flask from his pocket and with the cork in his teeth forced the neck of it between George's lips. . . .

As the rain roared down, Lottie gave her first order as a wife. "George! Go pry your father-in-law off my father-in-law. Quick, before they kill each other."

Then they appeared, arm in arm.

"You're still a hard man to lick, George," said Lottie's father.

"You're a tough little nut to crack yourself, Mac!"

"I'm thinking the joke's on us both," grinned Little Mac. "Hell or high water, the dear children are married now. We'll take the sheriff uptown and set up drinks for all?"

SWEETHEARTS of
ROMANCES • OF • THE • WOMEN

•DOÑA ROSA KITCHEN•

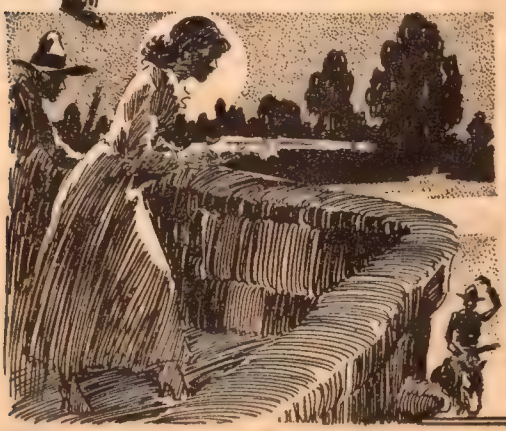
(1)

When the señorita Dõna Rosa danced, she danced her way into the hearts of all the caballeros in Arizona. In 1854, many a gallant Mexican lad strove to convince this seventeen-year-old beauty of the foolishness of spinsterhood. It remained for Peter Kitchen, handsome, swaggering Americano cowboy, to make the fair Doña accept double harness.

(2)

Her limpid brown eyes and copper-colored hair enthralled him; her charm held him. And for Senora Doña Rosa, Peter was ever the true and faithful knight. Life at their ranch on Potrero Creek was serenely happy until 1861, when Uncle Sam recalled his troops from the Territory, to fling them against his kinsmen of the Confederacy, and hectic days began for the Kitchens.

WINDAS 1940



(3)

For as the soldiers left Arizona, Chief Cochise, Apache Opportunist No. 1, began pillaging and murdering all settlers between Potrero and Magdalena. Raiding the Kitchen's ranch, he was beaten off from that fort-like residence. Peter had built ramparts around its flat roof, and here Doña Rosa paced sentry-go many a night while Peter drove in his herds to the sanctuary of the homestead.

the WESTERN TRAILS

WHO • CIVILIZED • THE • WEST : *by* CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

Five times in 1862 they resisted the vicious attacks of the Apaches. In 1863 a particularly stubborn onslaught was flung back, but in the final moments of the fight, a stray arrow brought sorrow to our sweethearts, for their young son was slain. Broken-hearted, the beautiful Doña Rosa still courageously refused to leave her husband's side, and seek safety in the city.

Cochise was persistence personified; the Kitchens indomitable. When their vaqueros were killed, Doña Rosa hired Opata Indians to help fight the Apaches It is of historic importance that at one time, this gallant American and his devoted wife were the sole white representatives to hold all that vast section for the United States. After ten years of bitter warfare, Cochise made peace.

Then Fortune smiled on Dõna and her husband. In one single year they made $10,000; the next netted nearly double. When the railroads came to Arizona, they sold their ranch at a good profit and moved to Tucson. Here Doña Rosa was still the perfect partner, the splendid helpmate, for her wise council oftimes offset Peter's reckless generosity in business deals with crafty promoters. So this famous couple journeyed together down through the pages of Western history, reaching Life's allotted span, sweethearts to the end.

CHAPTER ONE

A Trouble-Shooter Picks His Girl

SUE straightened up sleepily in her seat and glanced incuriously down the long length of the car as the coach door opened and a tall, broad-shouldered young man stepped inside. Shadowed by a flat-crowned black hat, alert blue eyes flitted along the double rows of seats crowded with boisterous, roughly-garbed men bound for the grade camps beyond the end of track.

His glance came to rest upon Sue and she saw him give an almost imperceptible start of surprise. For a moment their eyes met, clung, and she felt a warm wash of color tinge her cheeks, felt her heart give a queer little leap and quicken its beat. And now, as he started down the aisle, lithe, muscular body swaying with the lurch of the train, Sue moved hastily nearer the window, pretending to look into the night.

She was aware that he was standing beside her seat, one hand resting upon the back of the seat ahead.

"I beg yore pardon, ma'am. Do you mind if I sit here? It's the only seat not filled."

She turned her head and looked at him with an expression that she tried to make say, "I think you are rude, but if you insist, I must allow you half of the seat." But she really didn't feel that way. These last ten hours since leaving the stage-coach and boarding the train had been lonesome ones. So, she moved a little closer toward the window and said, "Of course."

He sat down, took off his hat, and held it in his lap, studying her with a strange intentness.

"I didn't know th' was a girl on th' train," he said. "You know this is th' only coach. Up ahead are all flat cars with steel an' grade equipment."

LOVE WAITS AT RAILS' END

A heart-throbbing novel of glorious romance in the old West's railroad camps

By John Paul Jones

"Shure, Dan, yez better be foindin' a preacher quick or 'tis mesilf thot will be comin' a-sparkin' her!"

Sue Langtry vowed to keep apart two fighters, or one would die—for her! But a handsome killer's love trap, set in a Paradise of railroad steel, snapped that promise; and Sue dared more than death for the enchantment that waited at rails' end.

She could not resist an impulse to use sarcasm. She looked at him innocently and said, "Should someone have told you?"

He grinned, his eyes puckering at the corners. She liked his grin.

"I was only tryin' to open th' conversation, ma'am. My name is Dan. Masters an' I'm bound for th' camp of Elan, Busch and Wood."

An excited interest brightened Sue's eyes.

"Do you know Hal Kinley? He's with them."

He shook his head.

"Don't know anyone there except old man Busch. He hired me in Omaha. I worked for him on th' U. P." Then, studying her with an expression of mild interest, he asked: "Yore father, brother?"

Sue felt her cheeks color. She was reluctant to tell a stranger the unusual relationship between herself and Hal. He might not understand—indeed, she was beginning to think her acceptance of Hal's proposition had been a hare-brained thing. Dan Masters appeared to sense her reluctance to answer, and abruptly changed the subject.

"They're shore weaving steel over this western country," he said. "It was only eight years ago th' U. P. was finished, an' already the's talk of a half dozen more transcontinental lines. I got an idee this line ain't stoppin' on th' Colorado border for long. Jes' sorta gettin' its breath an' sizin' up who its got to whip to keep goin' on west."

Because the whole of her twenty-one years had been spent upon a small ranch fifty miles from a railroad, Sue knew little about the conflict between bitter rivals who were making bids for shares in the rich rewards to be reaped in freight traffic from the Western Empire. But she listened to Dan with an absorbed interest while he related anecdotes of the U. P.'s building.

She found herself liking this Dan Masters with his friendly grin, his gay laughter and youthful exuberance. Almost before she realized it, she blurted out:

"I'm going to the grade camp to marry Hal."

SHE saw him stiffen a little as though from shock, watched him regain quick control of himself. He laughed, but she was conscious that it was forced.

"Allus my luck," he said ruefully. "Some other *hombre* gets th' girl."

Despite his attempt to act casual and unaffected, the wistfulness in his eyes caused Sue's pulse to quicken, and a feeling of tenderness possessed her. It seemed that she had known him for a long, long time and was bidding him adieu with her words while, in her heart, she was wanting him to stay. It was a peculiar feeling.

"You must love him a lot to give up a comfortable home, for life in a grade camp."

"I have no home," Sue said with a little catch in her breath; and before she realized it, she was telling him of her mother's death; the loss of the debt-ridden little ranch; and how hard it had been for her mother and her after her father's death years ago.

". . . Hal worked for us one fall," she continued, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed upon the plain gold band on one finger. "That was four years ago. After he left, he wrote at intervals. And when I wrote him about mother—" she paused and her hands clenched tighter.

She heard him say gently, "Mebbe you'd rather not talk about it, ma'am. I'm sorry I said somethin' thet made you think of it."

She raised her eyes to his, and she remembered long afterward how she yearned to have him make the faintest overture that would have broken down the frail barrier of her restraining shy-

ness. In that moment there surged over her all the loneliness and desolation she had known since her mother's death. She wanted to put her head against his shoulder, feel his comforting arms about her while she allowed the welled-up tears to come. But he appeared greatly distressed for having brought back sad memories. And now, in an attempt to divert her mind, he cried gaily:

"I'll bet you ain't 'et since mornin'!"

She raised her eyes to the basket in the luggage rack overhead.

"I have, but I'm hungry again and there's plenty for two."

He got the basket down, set it between them on the seat. There was chicken, ham, eggs, apple pie and cookies. And as they ate, Dan once more talked of railroad building. But in the midst of it, Sue looked at him suddenly, laughed.

"You didn't ask my name, so I'll tell you. It is Susan Langtry, and I've always been called Sue."

He looked at her a long moment before he said quietly, "It's a beautiful name—Sue."

A long while they ate in silence. The train was beginning to lurch more violently. Wheel-flanges screamed as they ground against too-tight rails.

At last, Sue raised her eyes, impelled by something within her: "Dan, I'm frightened."

"We'll stay on th' track," he assured her.

She shook her head, said quietly, "I don't mean about the train. I-it's about the grade camp . . . Hal—oh, everything!" she completed with a quick fling of her hands in a helpless gesture.

He stared at her, surprised, puzzled.

"You mean yore frightened of th' man yo're goin' to marry?" he said incredulously.

"I-I'm not sure I'll marry him. Four years ago, I-I liked him . . . maybe thought I was in love with him. When he wrote asking me to marry him—well, everything seemed so hopeless, so futile. I was lonely, desolate, there was no one—"

"Good lord!" said Dan with concern. "Yo're comin' out here to marry a man you ain't seen in four years? A man can change a lot in four years, Sue—even in a day," he added, so softly that she barely heard it.

"If, after seeing each other again, we—" Sue broke off with a helpless little shrug and looked at him appealingly. "I know it was a terrible rash thing to do, but . . . there seemed nothing else."

HE SAT silent many moments, slowly turning the flat-crowned hat in his hands, his eyes staring at the floor.

"A grade camp is no place for a girl like you, Sue," he said earnestly. "Not alone."

"But I'm to stay in Trinidad. Hal wrote he had made arrangements for me to live with a Mrs. Madigan, a widow, until we—until we know," she added after a long pause.

Dan shook his head.

"Trinidad's as tough as any of th' hell-on-wheels towns we had along th' U. P. Dance-halls an' saloons; gamblers, gunmen an' thieves."

Both of them looked toward the window as the train began to slow, brakes screaming against steel wheels. The bright glare of an engine's open fire-box door flashed against the window as they came to a full stop. Sue looked around at Dan excitedly.

"Are we there?"

He shook his head. "Another hour. Thet's a train eastbound with empties. It's on a sidin'."

Their train gave a jerk, began to gather momentum. Sue saw the long string of empty flat-cars drift slowly past like huge, dark shadows.

The coach door flew open before the

lunge of a man who slammed it behind him and stood with broad shoulders against it, surveying the crowded car with swift, all-inclusive scrutiny. His hand, thrust into a pocket of dove-gray pants, held back a side of his long, Prince Albert coat and revealed the butt of a shoulder-holstered gun. Shadowed by his wide-brimmed gray hat, his coppery-hued features with the narrow mustache, thin crescent scar on the chin and the sardonic smile quirking at his lips gave Sue a queer feeling of dislike, aversion.

She was conscious that Dan had stiffened, his eyes grown suddenly hard and narrowed. She could sense the tautness of Dan's nerves and muscles as the man's dark eyes came to rest upon him and he started down the aisle, swaying with the movement of the train.

The man halted beside their seat, braced himself with a hand against the seat-back, and with a gleam of frosty amusement in his dark eyes, said with ironic cordiality, "Hello, Dan. Didn't expect to meet you out this way. Nice to be seein' you again. And my congratulations! Hadn't heard you'd married. Got something worth fighting for now, eh?" and he chuckled mockingly.

Sue felt a repulsive shudder shake her and involuntarily she cringed back against the window. She saw Dan's eyes, bitter-hard, saw his bronzed face tighten and two hard lines form across his cheeks. She saw the blood recede from his knuckles, leaving them white, under the pressure of clenched fists. She could sense that he was making a tremendous struggle to keep his self-control; and she was startled to hear his voice so cool and unemotional when he spoke.

"Howdy, Laramie. I'll be seein' you in Trinidad."

Laramie's dark eyes flicked swiftly over Sue, a queer little smile upon his lips. Then he turned and went back up the aisle. Sue looked at Dan. She sensed that there had been something sinister in this meeting, despite its casual air. She saw the cold, blue gleam in Dan's eyes, saw his strong, brown hands were tightly clenched.

"Who is that man, Dan?" she whispered, a little frightened by she knew not what.

"A man," he said slowly, "thet I'm goin' to kill one of these days!"

SUE felt her own nerves tauten with fear and she sat with her hands in her lap, her body half bent toward Dan in a queer tense posture. What emotions seethed within him she could not guess. And then suddenly, all the tension seemed to flow from him, he relaxed, laughed. And Sue drew a deep, long breath of relief, as though her emotions ebbed and rose with his.

"That feller allus roils me, Sue. He cleaned me out've six months' wages in a crooked card game back on th' U. P. ten years ago; an' we've hed some runins since."

She stared at him startled, a hurt disappointment in her eyes.

"And you're going to kill him because of a card game?"

"No, I had that comin'. It was a good lesson for me. I was a kid of fifteen then; but Laramie has showed up in a lot of camps where I've worked since then. He's a gambler. In a Ward & Courtney camp last year, he killed my partner, an' challenged me to take up th' quarrel—with guns!"

Sue, listening tensely, her breath coming in quick little whispering gasps, clutched at his arm when he paused, and sat staring straight ahead, his bronzed face hard-set. Then she said with a quick catch in her breath, "And you fought him?"

Dan's voice was laden with a harsh, bitter tone. "His first shot knocked off

my hat, his second and third cut through my shirt 'thout touchin' me, his fourth shot knocked th' gun from my hand. An' he was laughin' an' tautin' me with every shot."

Sue was breathing fast. "And you didn't shoot once!"

"I emptied th' gun at him. I learned later it was his gun—loaded with blanks."

Her eyes went swiftly to the pearl-handled gun holstered upon his lean thigh, the cartridge-filled belt that encircled his slim waist.

"But why didn't you—"

"—use my own gun? I'd never carried one. I hated guns and killing. I couldn't use one. But a man can change a lot overnight. I got a gun th' next day an' looked for Laramie, but he was gone. This is th' first meetin' since then."

Fear caused Sue to feel writhing waves of hot and cold washing over her.

"You-you said you would see him in Trinidad—does that mean you're going to fight . . . with guns?" Then, when he didn't reply, she cried, "You mustn't, Dan! He'll kill you! You said you hate guns and killings, and you can't use a gun. You've said so!"

He turned now to face her more squarely in the seat. His eyes were grave, yet glowing with a soft warmth and Sue felt a strange new emotion grow within her. It was as though all the yearnings and vague, tantalizing desires of her life had blended into a passionate feeling of protective tenderness toward this man who, brief measures of time ago, had been a stranger. The crowded coach, the fumes and smoke from kerosene lamps, pipes, the stares from a dozen men did not exist for Sue. Her eyes met and clung to Dan's. She made no effort to veil their betrayal of the emotions that were aswirl within her.

With a trembling thrill, she moved into the circle of his arms opened to her. She laid her golden head back against his shoulders, raised her face, long dark lashes half curtaining her smouldering eyes.

"Dan!" she whispered. "Dan!"

He kissed her, long and gently, and she lay inert in the strong embrace of his arms, a vast ineffable happiness filling her heart.

"Sue," he whispered softly, his lips against her ear, "Yo're my girl now!"

"Yes, Dan. I'm your girl now."

CHAPTER TWO

Cupid Draws a Six-Gun

SUE wakened with a start and sat upright in bed, her golden hair falling about gleaming white shoulders, her blue eyes dazed, frightened for the long moment it took memory to crowd through the sleep-bewildered turmoil of her thoughts. Then she remembered she was in a hotel in Trinidad where Dan had brought her last night, when Hal failed to meet her at the train.

The loud knocking that had wakened her came again, more sharply, against the door. Her heart gave a joyous little leap. She remembered what Dan had said, leaving her at the door last night: "I'll call for you in th' mornin', Sue." And she remembered the thrill of his gentle goodnight kiss that she had carried into her dreams. She swung her long, slender legs from under the sheet, laughed gaily.

"Give me ten minutes, Dan," she called. "I'm not dressed yet."

Picking up a stocking, she suddenly grew tense, immobile, frightened eyes darting toward the door. The voice that replied was not Dan's, but one that sent a chill of fear through her.

"I've got to see you, Miss Langtry. I'll return in fifteen minutes."

It was Laramie! Panic swept over her. What did his visit mean? Dan. . . . She

sat there a long moment, trembling. She heard Laramie's footsteps dying away down the hall. Dread anxiety whipped her into haste. She discarded the breeches and shirt she had worn on the train for a simple blue gingham dress.

Standing before the cracked mirror of the wash-stand, she saw her pale face, the drawn, anxious expression in her eyes. She fought against the horror of a vision that kept flitting through her mind. Dan lying in a huddled heap . . . a bullet from Laramie's gun in him. Involuntarily, she drew her slim figure into a tense pose, her hands clenched at her sides. "If he's . . . harmed him . . . I-I'll kill him!" she cried tautly.

She heard quick footsteps coming down the hall . . . a quick rap upon her door. She went toward it slowly, dreading the message she might receive. "I'll see you in Trinidad," Dan had told Laramie. She opened the door, stood back.

Laramie bowed gravely.

"Sorry to disturb you, Miss Langtry; but there's something you should know. May I come in?"

Sue backed slowly into the room. Laramie shut the door and faced her, his features solemn.

"Ma'am, I'm not a tactful man. If I've got a shock comin' to me, I like to take it at one jolt, not in little jabs. I've got bad news for you."

Dear God! A sickening wave washed over Sue. She felt incapable of movement, of speech, for the long moment she stared with fascinated horror, aversion, hatred at the tall, coppery-featured man. *He had killed Dan!*

Laramie's dark eyes grew concerned. He took a step forward, said, "Now, ma'am, things like this happen. Take it like th' thoroughbred you are."

She was fighting to unlock the breath from her tight lungs. Her voice vibrated like a thrummed blade of steel as she cried tautly, "Y-you . . . killed . . . him!"

She saw a hard light come into Laramie's dark eyes, saw the thin lips tighten under the narrow, black mustache.

"It was him or me, ma'am," he said coldly. "He forced my hand. I had to kill him."

SHE would have sprung upon him, tearing at him like a maddened tigress, but her strength was gone. The world was whirling as she sank slowly into a crumpled heap upon the edge of the bed. There is an agony that knows no expression; a pain that paralyzes the muscles.

Laramie stood facing her, one hand in a pocket of his dove-gray trousers, a queer mixture of uncertainty and compassion in his eyes. He rolled his tongue over his thin lips, made a move toward the door, then halted.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, ma'am; but this is a wild, rough country out here. These things happen among men. You've got to get used to them. When a man tries to kill you, you kill him—or get killed. Hal Kinley drew first an' I—"

"Hal! Hal!" she cried, and half rose from the bed. "It was Hal you killed?"

Laramie stared violently and then for a long moment stood immobile, staring at her. Suddenly, his face relaxed, a queer ironic smile came upon it and he expelled his breath with a slow-drawn oath. Then he laughed with cynical mockery.

"You thought I meant Masters, eh?"

But Sue didn't hear him. She sat there upon the edge of the bed staring at him, her brain still blank with the shock of its recoil from the depths of agonized despair. Then uncontrollable hysteria possessed her. She laughed wildly, hands locked in her lap, body rocking to and fro.

Laramie took two steps forward and slapped her hard across the face.

"Come out of it, ma'am! Get hold of yourself!"

And gradually she did. Her wild laugher subsided into jerky little sobs. and then she threw herself across the bed, face down.

"Go . . . away," she cried brokenly. "Go away!"

A long while afterward, she rose and washed herself. She stared at herself in the cracked mirror.

"I can't feel grief!" she told herself. "It is as though he was just someone I'd known casually—almost a stranger." She studied herself in wonderment. What had happened to her? She had come to Trinidad believing she would marry Hal. In her mind, she had assembled a picture of him as she knew he would be. Tall and handsome, gray eyes filled with laughter. She had thought herself in love with him four years ago. She remembered how her mother had called it girlish infatuation and cleverly managed that they should never be alone together. And now . . .

Hal was dead. And she felt no grief, no sense of loss—no more than she would feel toward one whom she had barely known. She shouldn't feel that way, she told herself; but she did. What had happened to her? . . .

"You're my girl now," Dan Masters had told her. And she was—utterly. Nothing could change that. With him, she would walk content, unafraid. Then a dreading terror roused itself in her. What if it had been Dan! Some day, it might be. "He's a man I'm goin' to kill one of these days!" he had said of Laramie.

Where was Dan? He had promised—

Quick, firm footsteps came down the hall, halted before her door. There came a soft tap, and Dan's low voice, "Wake, Sue?"

She flew to the door, flung it open and had her arms about his neck, crying like a frightened child.

"Sue, honey! What's wrong?" He spoke the words quickly.

Held secure in the strong embrace of his comforting arms, she raised tear-wet face, a smile trembling upon her lips.

"Oh, Dan! Dan!" she whispered. "Hold me tight! Don't ever let me go!"

"Never, darlin'!" he breathed against her ear. "But what has happened? Yo're heart is flutterin' like a frightened bird's an' yo're all trembly."

SHE told him then, of Laramie's visit and the agony of her dread before she knew Dan was safe. She watched Dan's bronzed features grow grim, his blue eyes narrow into cold slits. Gently, he led her to a chair, sat down and pulled her into his lap, cuddling her in his arms.

"I knew Laramie had killed Hal," he said quietly. "I was on my way here to tell you when I was arrested."

She grew tense in his arms, eyes widening in fear.

"Arrested!" Her breath came fast.

"This Laramie hombre is crowdin' me, Sue. He knew I was on my way here to tell you. He's got friends who are lawmen—in a town where th' ain't no law except what a man carries in a holstered gun!" he added, with an ironic laugh. "I didn't know th' reason behind th' arrest, but they held me for an hour. I see why now," he completed grimly.

"But I don't understand, Dan. Why should Laramie want to tell me himself?"

Dan looked down in her eyes and shook his head slowly.

"Sue, th' minds of some men work in strange ways. Laramie's got a mind like thet. Last night on th' train, he thought you were my wife. It started his mind workin' in a certain way. Later, he found out you were comin' to marry Hal. That changed th' workin' of his mind in another direction. It's hard to understand a man like Laramie. He allus knows what he wants, but not allus how to get it."

She stared at him, bewildered, and slowly shook her head, her eyes puckered by a puzzled frown that crinkled her smooth brow.

"What do you mean, Dan?"

He said slowly, not looking at her, "I mean thet I've got to kill Laramie!"

Instantly, panic possessed her. She clung to him as though she thought he were leaving now to execute the threat.

"No, Dan! No! For my sake, you mustn't quarrel with him! Avoid him!"

"I can't Sue," he said simply. "Laramie's mind began figger'n a way to get you from th' minute he saw you on th' train. When he found out thet you were comin' to meet Hal, he figgered Hal, not me, was th' first obstacle. He claims self-defense for th' killin'. Hal did go for a gun first, but Hal was drunk—thet's why he didn't meet you—an' Laramie taunted him into a rage."

She stared at him aghast, horror widening her eyes. She said in a shocked, tight voice, "T-that man is a fiend, Dan! *Get me?* I'll kill him first!"

Dan's smile was faintly bitter, he nodded slowly. "Yeah, that's why I've got to kill him—so you won't. An' the's other reasons, too."

She was silent a long minute; and, for the first time, became aware of the street noises below. The raucous laughter of men, the creak of a lumbering wagon, the *clop-clop* of horses. Through the window, she could see the roofs of rough-plank houses, in the far distance a long wisp of black smoke trailed in the sky above a slow-moving work-train. She sat up suddenly, looked at Dan with an eager hope.

"Dan, let's go away! There's other places—"

"Don't, Sue!" he said quickly. "Don't ask me to leave. A man can't run away from himself; an' if I left here because of Laramie, I'd be tryin' to run from my own cowardice th' rest of my life. An' besides, this is my country, Sue. I love its deserts, its mountains, its vastness. I belong here. You belong here. It's our West."

She looked at him, her blue eyes frightened and imploring. Slowly, she shook her head.

"Oh, darling, I don't want it if . . . if . . . something happened to you."

"A man's got to play th' kind of cards life deals him, Sue. Things happen because they've got to happen. It was in my cards thet I'd meet you. It's in th' cards that I'll kill Laramie—or he'll kill me. A man can't run away from a thing like thet. No matter where he goes."

She was frightened by the solemn conviction in his voice. She didn't believe in his fatalism, yet, with strange wonderment, she knew he had expressed a philosophy that always had, and always would, guide his life. She could not change that—nothing could change it. Intuitively,

she knew that if Laramie and Dan ever met in combat, his prophecy would be fulfilled. One of them would die. And in that moment she resolved that she would prevent it—no matter how.

"I've got a place for you to stay, Sue. The's an Irishwoman cookin' for th' outfit. She'll be glad to have you bunk with her until me'n you. . . . Sue, darlin', will you marry me?"

She raised her face, her eyes luminous with a soft, warm glow as mystic as a distant star peeping through purple, shadowed night.

"Yes, Dan!" she whispered. "You said I was your girl."

His strong arms drew her closer and he whispered with a fierce, passionate vehemence, "*My* girl, Sue! Always!"

"*Always*, Dan!" she whispered. "And, darling, promise me—you won't quarrel with Laramie today."

"Yes, Sue. I promise."

She knew then what she must do. Back on the train, Dan had said, "Laramie believes thet whatever a man is strong enough to get an' clever enough to keep, is his." *Clever enough to keep. . . .*

CHAPTER THREE

Rail-Girl's Love Threat

WALKING down Trinidad's single, crowded street with its overflow of hurrying, excited people, Sue grew self-conscious under the stares of men who, seeing her, would momentarily slacken their mad haste and turn their heads. After Dan had left for the grade camp to get a conveyance for her and her luggage, Sue had changed back into breeches, gray shirt and sombrero. Naively, she thought it was a woman attired in man's clothes that caused their stares.

Saloon swinging-doors were in constant motion with an incessant to-and-fro flow of men. She could hear raucous laughter, ribald jests and boisterous voices from beyond the doors. Big fists pounded bars, bottles and glasses clinked.

All about her was the mad, hurried rush of a boomtown. "Buy real estate!" That was the universal slogan of the town. Trinidad was up and coming. It would become the supply point for the increasing number of silver mines; it would become the hub of a Western Empire, with its spokes reaching into the ranges of northwest Texas and New Mexico.

Carried along by the flow of humanity about her, Sue brushed against richly-dressed speculators from the East, engineers, cowmen, gamblers, gunmen, and the work-roughened muckers from the grade camps.

Suddenly, she halted. Just ahead of her and across the wide, dirt street, she saw a long, wide building with a low, flat roof and a wood awning extending over the boardwalk in front of it. Across the awning was painted in big letters: LARAMIE'S.

She stopped dead-still, heard vaguely the mumbled apology of the man directly behind her as he stumbled into her. Her heart began to beat with quick, short jabs that sent chilly pulsations of fear quivering along her nerves. She made a half-step, halted, while resolution struggled against fear. Then her mouth tightened and with firm, determined steps, she strode across the street.

She thrust her way among the men crowding into the building and was carried along by those about her. Her nostrils quivered at the smell of stale beer and whiskey fumes, the odor of man-sweat and tobacco smoke.

Laramie's was the largest dancehall and saloon along a street crowded with such places. Hurried, perspiring bartenders worked feverishly behind the long bar before which men stood three-deep.

Sue, her slim young figure straight and dignified, shoving her way through a group at the bar, heard startled ejaculations as they made way for her. A red-face, bald-headed bartender, about to set glasses and bottles before a noisy group of customers, halted and stared at her from round, startled eyes.

"I am looking for Mr. Laramie," said Sue in a firm tone.

It was a moment before the bartender found his voice. Then, setting the bottle and glasses down, he jerked his head toward the rear of the long, wide room.

"All th' way back, ma'am—office door on th' right."

Striding the length of the room, Sue heard, and ignored, whistles, calls and low laughter from men who had turned to watch her. She found the heavy-plank office door, with the word *Private* on it, and raised her doubled fist, hesitated while her heart began its hurrying pound. Then, she rapped sharply.

A voice said, "Come in!"

SHE turned the knob, stepped in, closed the door and stood with her back against it. Laramie, seated behind a table that served as desk, half rose from his chair, held that pose for the long moment that startled surprise swept across his coppery features. Then, with a smile, he stood up.

"Ma'am, this is an unexpected pleasure! I'm at your service."

"Mr. Laramie—," Sue began in a tight voice, but Laramie cut her off with:

"My friends call me Laramie—just Laramie," he said.

Looking at Laramie standing there with his hands clasped behind him, holding his long Prince Albert back to reveal a plumb-colored vest spanned by a heavy, gold chain, his dark eyes fixed upon her in an expression of mixed puzzlement and triumph, Sue felt a shudder of aversion. She hated this man.

"What do your enemies call you?" she demanded coldly.

She watched the thin smile curl his lips, his eyes fill with a gleam of frosty amusement.

"Ma'am, they're words I wouldn't use before a lady."

Sue felt a momentary tinge of warmth color her cheeks, but she kept her eyes steadfastly upon him.

"Laramie, nothing you could say or do would shock me. Have you ever killed a woman?"

The question caught him unaware. He gave a start, stiffened for an instant, gaping, while a startled light flashed in his dark eyes, Then he got control of himself and laughed.

"Just why did you ask me that? No, I've never killed a woman—not that some of them haven't deserved it." He added in a harder tone, "Why."

She moved slowly across the room, halted before the desk and rested both slim hands, palms down, upon it, her lithe young body bent forward, her face looking up into his, grim and pale.

"Because, Laramie," she said in a slow, taut voice, "if you harm Dan Masters, you're going to have to kill one—or be killed by her!"

Laramie stared at her for a long, still moment, his powerful body unconsciously rigid. Then, his eyes drifted slowly over her from waistline to crown of black sombrero. She could see the quickened pulsation of the pulse against his temple.

"Ma'am," he said slowly, and there was wonderment in his tone, "you're a remarkable girl!" Then, an almost sardonic smile quirking his lips, he corrected himself, "Maybe, I should say, Dan Masters is a remarkable man—where women are concerned. He's loved an' left a dozen women in grade camps from the U. P. to the Missouri, and back again to the Colorado Line—yes, a remarkable man."

The color drained from her face, her

nostrils distended and white circles formed about her mouth corners.

"You're a liar, Laramie!"

"Other women have called me that for the same reason," he said quietly. "Some of them apologized later." He waved a hand toward a chair. "Sit down, Miss Langtry. I want to talk to you."

"I've said what I came to say, Laramie. Harm Dan and you'll have to kill me—or be killed!"

SHE whirled, had taken a quick step toward the door, when she heard him come swiftly from the table toward her. She turned, her eyes ablaze.

"Miss Langtry, aren't you fair enough to listen to the defense? You've listened to my enemies and you condemn me without—"

"You killed Hal Kinley in cold blood, didn't you?" she cried "Are you going to defend that—or tell me why you killed him? You killed Dan Masters' partner and—"

"Both of those men had their guns leveled upon me. Should I have let them kill me? Why did I kill Kinley?" He stared at her. "To keep from being killed, of course."

"You killed him," she blazed, "because you wanted me!"

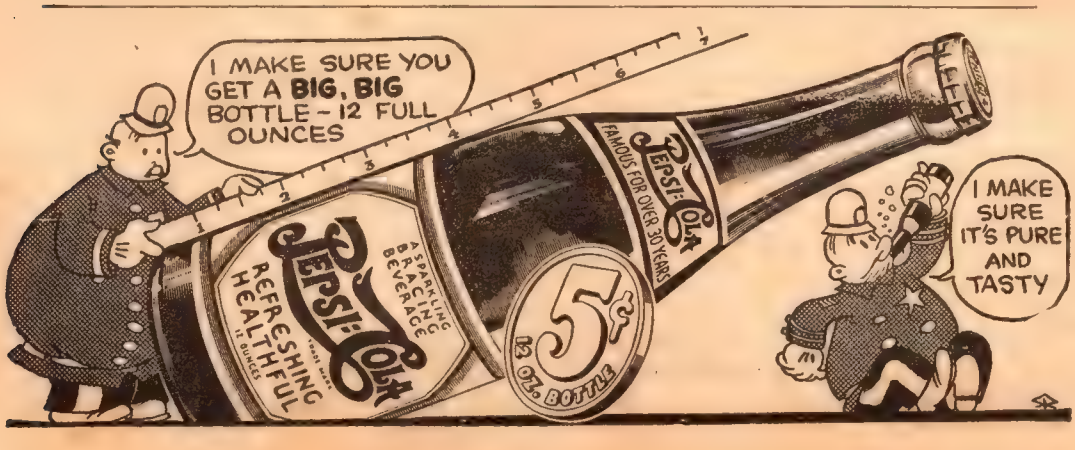
He sat on the edge of the table, one booted foot just off the floor. He spoke quietly.

"I'm called a hard, ruthless man, Miss Langtry. I've made enemies. I've made enemies because I am a stronger man trampling over weaker men to take what I want. That's the law of life—the weak die that the strong may live. Ten years ago, I returned from the war to find all that I had possessed claimed by others. I went to a lawyer, hoping to regain some of my property. I didn't regain my property, but that lawyer gave me a whole philosophy of life in a few words. And I've lived by it ever since. I discarded all ethical principles as I would cast aside a ragged and useless garment. Whatever a man is strong enough to take, and clever enough to keep—is his! I wanted you the moment I saw you on the train."

Sue stared at him, incredulous that a man could so calmly set forth his own villainy.

She was startled at the calm, quietness of her own voice: "You are no more than a beast, Laramie. A beast with a brain seething with vile thoughts and . . ."

"As are all men," he interrupted quietly. "We're born with instincts that create desires. Some men desire wealth, others power, others a woman. Most men shroud their desires under veils of hypocrisy; and hide the vileness—as you call it—of their thoughts under a thin veneer of—" he paused for a moment, then completed with a sneering laugh, "culture."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Sue leaped up, her pretty face ashen. "I've listened to your defense, Laramie. It only adds a blacker hue—"

"Wait, Sue! I haven't completed. I've said I want you. I'll add—I shall have you!"

Sue whirled then, ran to the door. She was breathing heavily, her face paper-white. She turned to look back at him, her lips quivering with impotent anger and hatred.

"If you harm Dan Masters, I'll kill you, Laramie!"

She saw his dark eyes hard upon her, his coppery-hued features immobile.

"Or you'll love me, Sue," he said quietly.

Back in her room, she sat upon the edge of the bed and trembled, her hands locked tight in her lap. She could not thrust the vision of Laramie from her mind. She saw his coppery-hued features, his dark eyes, the crescent scar on his chin and shuddered. He had been so sure of himself, so certain that in the end he would prevail. And a vast fear of uncertainty was upon Sue.

CHAPTER FOUR

No Preacher in Paradise

IT WAS late afternoon when Dan returned from the grade camp with two saddle-horses. Sue's luggage could be picked up by the supply wagon and follow later.

Leaving town at a trot, they passed a constant flow of horsemen and vehicles bound for Trinidad. Sue's eyes glowed with excitement as she watched this hurrying stream of humanity.

"It's allus thet way when a town starts boomin'," said Dan. "A few months from now, you'll see them stampedin' into some other town."

They turned off the trail, traversing rough, timbered ground until they reached the grade. Far to the east, mountains made a ragged, blue-black line against the sky. Frothy bits of clouds, tinged with mauve and rose and gold by the setting sun, drifted slowly upon the vast blue ocean of the heavens.

"Sue, darlin'," said Dan, "a grade camp won't be like what you've been accustomed to. But soon's I get straightened out a little, I'll send out for furnishin' an'—"

Sue's gay laughter halted him. She reached over and put a slim hand over his brown one. "Darling, you talk as though I have just come from some finishing school in the East! I've lived all my life on a little ranch in the most primitive part of the West."

He urged his horse close, lifted her from the saddle and sat her across his lap, his arms holding her tightly.

"You'n me'll get along, honey! Before we're through, we'll own a gradin' outfit of our own!"

She raised her face, held her lips close to his, whispering: "Or a railroad, if we want it, Dan!"

He held her for long minutes there close against him and an overpowering urge to tell him of her visit to Laramie was upon her. Yet, she dreaded his reaction; and, questioned, she could not tell him what Laramie had threatened. And it might even make the meeting between the two more certain. Dan might feel that Laramie believed he was hiding behind a woman's skirts.

They reached the end of excavations. The fresh-turned earth of the grade ended abruptly. Double rows of two-wheeled scrapers were drawn up to one side. Heavy ploughs lay upon their sides, earth-scoured blades gleaming in the setting sun.

The terrain grew more rough. Sharp rocks stuck up from the cracked earth. The vegetation was sparse, stunted. Evening shadows were beginning to gather

in from the distance like a thin mist of gray powder. And then suddenly, far ahead, Sue saw her first sight of the camp.

Row upon row of tents, glowing in huge blobs of yellow luminosity from lamplight filtering through their canvas walls. A hundred yards before reaching the first tent, they came to a large pole corral, crowded with milling horses and mules.

They turned their mounts over to a small, redheaded man who stared at Sue a little aghast.

"This is Timmie Clark, th' corral boss, Sue," said Dan.

Timmie's red face grew more red, he rubbed a gnarled hand energetically up and down the leg of his overalls, offered it to Sue.

"Shore as hell glad to know yuh, Missus Masters," he said. "Knowed Dan on th' U. P. Yuh done yorese'f proud by gittin' into double harness with—"

"We ain't married yet, Timmie," said Dan, with a grin at Sue. We're aimin' to be soon's we can find a preacher."

"Find a preacher?" said Timmie. "Yuh just come from Trinidad, didn't yuh?"

A slow look of wonderment came upon Dan's face, he turned to confront Sue and slowly shook his head.

"Honey, you know I never thought of that!"

"And neither," she said, "did I!" and they both laughed.

Then she became aware that Timmie was surreptitiously signaling Dan with his eyes. Dan said, "Wait a minute, honey," and followed Timmie a few paces away. They conversed in low tones for a moment. When Dan returned, she saw that whatever Timmie had said bothered him. He put his arm through hers and said, "Le's go meet Mrs. O'Rourke."

They walked in silence half the distance to the head of the camp street. A prowling dog came slinking through the shadows and tagged along at their heels. The tents were alive with the sound of men. Sue looked up into Dan's face and the expression she saw there frightened her a little.

"What is it, Dan?"

He shook his head, said shortly, "Nothin', honey,—nothin' much."

She knew better. She could sense an increased tension about him. His firm lips had set into a straight line, and there was a grim look in his eyes.

"There is, Dan," she insisted. "What did Timmie say to you?" And then, because he did not reply, she clung to his arm tighter, said gently, "Dan, your troubles are my troubles now."

THEY were walking down the wide camp street. Here and there, men in undershirts sat on empty powder cans of dynamite placed before their tents. For the most part, they greeted Dan with a careless wave of the hand and an "Evenin' "; but now and then a burly Irishman would jump up, run out to grasp Dan's hand with a "Shure 'tis glad oi'm to see ye, Dan! An' this is th' missus! A foine pair ye make, th' two ov yez!" And each time Dan would explain they weren't married yet, Irish eyes would twinkle at Sue. "Shure, Dan, yez better be foindin' a preacher quick or 'tis mesilf that will be comin' a-sparkin' her!"

The cook-house was a long, tar-papered building, low-roofed but wide. Rows of rough-plank tables, benches on each side, ran the full length of the room. Kerosene lamps, hung in wall-brackets supplied the light, but only two of these burned now.

Dan halted in the doorway, called, "Mrs. O'Rourke!"

There was a flurry of movement from beyond the partition separating mess-hall from kitchen, then a large, carrot-haired woman, flour covering hands and bare arms, appeared.

"Oh, 'tis ye, Dan—an' th' mavourneen!" she cried and came lumbering toward them, beaming. "Oi'm bakin'," she explained. "'Tis glad oi am to have ye, Sue—aven if it manes oi've got a rival now for th' affection ov th' byes! Shure, 'tis hungry th' two ov ye are! Sit yersilfs down this minute!"

They had completed their meal before Sue mentioned the thing that had been heavy upon her: "Dan, you haven't told me what Timmie said that troubles you."

He sat with his elbows resting upon the table, his hands folded in front of him. He didn't reply for a long minute. There was the rattle of baking pans and the slam of the oven door beyond the partition, where Mrs. O'Rourke was attending her breadmaking.

"Honey, it's nothin' much. I've got to go somewhere tonight. I—"

Sue caught her breath, fear washing upon her. "Not back to Trinidad, Dan?"

"The's another camp ten miles below here, Number Two camp," he said. "I've got to ride down there tonight—be gone all night."

She let her breath out in a vast sigh of relief.

"Oh, Gee, Dan! Why didn't you tell me that before? I've been so frightened that whatever it was Timmie told you had something to do with Laramie!"

"I'm wonderin'," he said slowly, his jaws stiffening, "if mebbe it hasn't!"

"But he's in Trinidad!" she cried tensely. "Oh, Dan! Even the thought of that man fills me with fear, dread."

"Laramie won't be at Camp Two," he said, with a bitter laugh. "Thet ain't his way. He plots an' schemes an' hires someone else to do his dirty work. An' allus in a way nobuddy can prove Laramie's part in it. If it goes right, Laramie wins, if it goes wrong th' other feller loses."

"But why must you go, Dan?"

"Because thet's my job, honey. I'm hired to see thet things go right in th' camps—I'm a sort've walkin' boss, peace-officer an' utility man."

Sue's hands were tightly clenched, she leaned forward, her eyes anxious.

"T-there won't be fighting, will there, Dan?"

He smiled at her.

"Not with guns, honey."

"Oh!" she laughed in relief. "The other kind isn't so terrible. And if you get a black-eye and a bloody nose—darling, you'd look a sight with a black-eye!"

He reached across the table, took her small, slim hands between the palms of his strong ones, pulled her toward him. He kissed her gently.

"Twenty-four hours ago, I'd never seen you, Sue; but for a long time I allus knew what you'd look like when I did. When I come back, we're ridin' to Trinidad an' findin' a preacher."

"Dan!" her eyes glowed with quick excitement. "Why couldn't we be married here in camp?"

"Shure, a foine idee!" exclaimed the voice of Mrs. O'Rourke. " 'Tis a weddin' cake the' loikes ov which has not been seen since me own marriage thot oi'll bake!"

After Dan had left for Camp Two, promising Sue he would return quickly as possible, Mrs. O'Rourke showed Sue her quarters. The supply wagon had arrived with her luggage and a second cot had been procured from the commissary.

The big Irishwoman sat upon the edge of her steel cot untying her shoes. Sue was undressed and in bed. She looked at Mrs. O'Rourke, her eyes troubled.

"Mrs. O'Rourke, there won't be any trouble at Camp Two, will there? Serious trouble. Shootin?"

Mrs. O'Rourke sighed and straightened up, shaking her head.

"Honey, a grade camp is th' divil's spawnin' ground. Min are loike bastes. Forivér a-snarlin', clawin' an' tearin' at wan anither. Dan is a foine bye—there's

none better; but ye'll spind yure loife regrettin' ye married him—an' if ye don't marry him, ye'll spind it in misery an' unhappiness." Mrs. O'Rourke sighed heavily, yawned, raised her brawny arms overhead. "Us weaker sex," she said tragically, "bears th' burdens ov humanity. Oi've been married mesilf, widder that oi am now. Me Paddy was a card-playin', drinkin', carousin', cussin' Irishman—but a foine figger ov a man—God rist his sould!"

Mrs. O'Rourke, ready for bed, blew out the lamp. Sue heard the springs of the iron cot creak under the burden of her weight.

"Us wimmin is foolish critturs," said Mrs. O'Rourke. "Take thot gurl at Camp Two. It's eatin' her heart out she is over some man; an' loikely he's off makin' love to anither gurl. Min, darlin', is faithless critturs—not min loike Dan an' me own Paddy. God rist his sould!"

Sue felt a tension building up within her. She fought against the black thought that persisted in her mind. Laramie's words came back to her, "He's loved and left a dozen women in grade camps from the U. P. to the Missouri and back again to the Colorado Line!"

He lied! He lied! she told herself passionately. Why was she allowing even the faintest glimmer of distrust to enter her mind. Dan had told her his reason for going to Camp Two. She mustn't doubt him, ever, ever! But why had Timmie called Dan aside? Why hadn't he come right out and said—

Mrs. O'Rourke chuckled in the darkness.

"I jist remimbered, Sue. Ye'll have to be kapin' yur own two eyes on thot Molly McCaffery over to Camp Two. She was only a spindly-legged, freckled-faced little thing whin Dan knew her on th' U-Pay; but she's a gurl to take a man's eye today!"

Mrs. O'Rourke grunted, slept.

CHAPTER FIVE

No Wedding At Railhead

SUE was wakened by the rattle of pans. She sat up on her cot, brushing her golden hair back from her face, yawning. A dim, ashen light seeped through the tent walls. She drew back the covers, began to dress in fervid haste.

She could hear the shouts of men; the milling of horses and mules as they were harnessed. Dressed, she found pail and wash-basin on a bench outside the kitchen door and washed.

Mrs. O'Rourke, aided by two kitchen flunkeys, waved aside Sue's offer to help with the breakfast.

"Take a walk, mavourneen. Me'n you'll have our breakfast afther oi've sint these hungry bastes to their wuruk."

Sue went to the rear of the cook-house, walking toward the corral. Dan would be here soon, she thought. He would stop at the corral first. She saw groups of rough-garbed, bearded graders talking together about the mess-hall, waiting for the clang of the steel triangle that would announce breakfast.

Muleskinners passed, walking at the head of their teams. They gave a little start at sight of Sue, nodded and went on. A hundred trace-chains were a-jingle, stomping teams rolled up a dust-cloud as they were led to water in the little creek two hundred yards away.

Sue climbed atop the pole corral, sat there with her arms folded watching the teams file out. Turning her head toward the stable, she saw Timmie hastening about his duties. She was tempted to try to learn what message he had given Dan. And then the thought caused her to feel a little angry at herself. She shouldn't be marrying a man she didn't trust. She did trust him—it was only that she was afraid.

She was about to climb down from the

corral fence when she saw a rider approaching down the trail from Trinidad. Her heart gave a quick, wild leap, then seemed to stop for a long moment.

Laramie!

Laramie's features expressed no surprise as he rode up, doffed his hat and said politely, "Good morning, Miss Langtry."

Sue's fingers, clutching the pole, were dead-white. She did not look at Laramie, but cast her eyes in quick panic in the direction from which she expected Dan to come. If he came now and found Laramie here! Then a fear-chilling thought struck her: Laramie intended Dan should meet him. That's why he was here!

"If you're here looking for trouble," she said tightly, "remember that I meant what I said yesterday!"

Laramie's lips quirked with an amused smile.

"I'm sure you meant it—yesterday. And I'm equally sure you won't mean it tomorrow." He shook his head, a feigned expression of wonderment upon his face. "Sue, I can't understand what there is about that Masters man that has such an appeal to women. Yesterday, you threatened to kill me if I harmed him. I expect, when I get back to Trinidad, to have that pretty girl whom he rode into town with last night after midnight—," he broke off suddenly, looked quickly in the direction of the commissary as though he had heard his name called—"I've got to see one of the boys."

Sue felt suddenly weak. Dan in Trinidad—with a girl! The girl from Camp Two? Mrs. O'Rourke had said Molly McCaffery was eating her heart out for a man who had cast her aside—but Dan had just come to Trinidad. He hadn't seen Molly since she was a little girl—or had he? Molly had been in other grade camps since then. So had Dan.

She climbed down from her perch and, with grim determination, sought out Timmie Clark. He saw her coming, halted his work and stood leaning on the handle of a pitch-fork.

"Timmie, why did Dan have to go to Camp Two? What was it you told him?"

Timmie's red face showed an expression of distress. He moved his feet uneasily.

"Ma'am, it wasn't nothin' yuh need worry about. Dan'll be back safe an' sound this mornin'."

"Why did Dan take Molly McCaffery to Trinidad last night?"

Timmie gave a start, stared at her and shook his head, sighing. Then she saw his eyes harden as he looked off in the direction of the commissary.

"Laramie saw him an' told yuh, eh? I reckon Dan'll give me hell fur doin' it, but I'll tell yuh why he took Molly to town. She's in bad trouble."

SUE felt her heart grow cold.

"What kind of trouble, Timmie?"

An instant, she saw a spark of anger glow in the little corral boss' eyes. Then he looked at her squarely, said, "Ma'am, yo're makin' a mistake, marryin' Dan."

Sue took a long breath. Her face was quite pale, but her mouth was set firmly. She turned quickly upon her heel to hide her face. She knew she was going to cry, and she wasn't going to let Timmie see her. She heard his voice saying coldly, "A woman thet can't trust her man, is pilin' up misery for both of them!"

She ran then toward the little tent outside the cook-house. She flung herself, face-down across the cot and sobbed. "I'm a despicable, jealous, suspicious little fool!" she cried passionately. "But I can't help it! I can't! I can't! I love him!"

She heard a light footstep outside, heard the tent-flap slapped aside. She sat up, dabbing at her eyes. Then she felt a mad anger fire her brain. Laramie stood just within the tent, his bare head bent

to clear the apex of the triangular opening.

"Get out!" cried Sue, and her voice vibrated like a taut wire. "Get out!"

"I've got to talk to you, Sue. I want to make a bargain."

She looked at him, her eyes wells of hatred, yet she felt something of that queer, morbid fascination she had known yesterday. She did not reply. He came another step inside, allowed the tent-flap to close.

"I told you yesterday that I had discarded my ethical scruples long ago. I do not cloak my vileness—as you call it—under hypocrisy. I didn't sleep last night—and it's the first time so long as I can remember that my conscience ever kept me awake! I was thinking of you, Sue—and myself. I'm in love with you."

Sue's lips curled in scorn, but she said nothing. Despite her aversion, the man intrigued her.

"According to your standards," he continued, "I'm a pretty low human. I admit I have been. But can't a man reform, Sue—even a man like me?"

There was in his tone a penitential sincerity that showed, too, in his eyes. Sue stared at him, startled. For a moment, she almost believed him. Then into her thoughts came memory of what he had said yesterday. Fighting to master her anger, she stood up.

"Laramie, you're a despicable beast. I've never felt the same aversion for any living thing that I do for you. Behind your mask of sudden reformation, you're laughing at me. Cynically amused that you are able to play on my sympathy, my pity—but you aren't able to fool me, Laramie! Love you— I hate you!"

HE looked at her gravely without a trace of anger. Slowly, he nodded.

"I can't expect you to believe my words, Sue. I'm only asking that you give me a chance to prove them. I can't expect you to forget some of the things I said yesterday. But couldn't you—," he paused, looked at her with a strange wistfulness, "forgive? I lied to you a while ago, not in what I said, but in the implication I made. Dan Masters did ride into Trinidad at midnight with a girl. Her sweetheart is in jail charged with murder. There was the threat of mob violence and—"

"Oh!" she cried, and stared at him. Her heart made a bounding leap and her nerves relaxed, as though something which had held them taut had been severed.

"—but," continued Laramie quietly, "I've told you the truth about Masters' having girls in a dozen camps. I'm not going to let you idealize him as a standard by which to judge me. I know you think you are in love with him. Dozens of women have. There's some strange magnetism about him that draws women to him—to their later regret. I tell you this because it has to do with the bargain I'll make.

"I don't believe you, Laramie," said Sue. "Somehow, just this moment, I realize that it doesn't matter what Dan's past has been. I love him. I'm going to marry him—today!"

Laramie studied her for a long moment.

"No, you won't marry him today, Sue," he said quietly. "And if you'll go to Trinidad, you'll understand why."

Panic possessed her. She remembered the last time Dan had been detained.

"It's your dirty work again, Laramie! You've had him arrested, as you did yesterday. Well, I will go to Trinidad—and marry him in jail!"

"He isn't in jail, Sue. But if you do come to Trinidad, you won't want to marry him today—or any other time. He sent a man out here to tell Busch he wouldn't be able to return today, and that you were to be told he was tied-up

on business for the firm. His messenger knew I was riding out here, so he asked me to bring the news."

Sue's eyes blazed.

"Laramie, you're a clever fiend! If Dan is detained in Trinidad, it's through some devilish trickery of yours."

"Or perhaps," Laramie suggested softly, "it is because of an old light of love who has just learned that Dan intends to marry you. It could throw a jealous woman into a furious rage to know Dan was marrying another woman —if he had made promises and avowals—"

"Get out, Laramie! Get out! If I had a gun—"

Sue took a step forward, fists clenched, slim body crouched. Laramie, reached into a pocket of his frock coat, took out a small derringer and extended it.

"Permit me," he said.

"I don't want a gun loaded with blanks —like the one you provided for Dan. I'm going to Trinidad, Laramie. And don't come near me!"

"So you do believe there might be truth in what I say?" His dark eyes were mocking her, a thin ironic smile played across his lips.

"I'm going to marry Dan—whatever I may discover!"

"Sorry I won't be there for the ceremony," said Laramie cynically. "But I've got to remain here another two hours or so. But, I'm gambling you don't marry Dan!"

CHAPTER SIX

Love's Ambush For A Killer

SUE was grateful that the work of clearing up the breakfast dishes kept Mrs. O'Rourke too busy to notice how distraught and tense Sue was as she ate breakfast.

"Shure, Dan'll be a-comin' soon, mavourneen," said the fat woman. "Afther ye eat, take a ride along th' grade an' watch thim worthless sons of Erin move dirt for anither railroad—of which we have too many now."

Sue did not see Laramie as she made her way back to the corral. She found Timmie still cleaning stalls.

"Timmie, you were right," she said quietly. "A woman who can't trust her man—"

"Shucks, ma'am!" said Timmie, shifting uneasily, his red face abashed, "I lost me temper for a minnit. You'n Dan'll make a fine pair."

"I've been a jealous little fool, Timmie," said Sue, feeling a measure of relief in getting it off her mind. "But I've been terribly afraid, too. I'll never distrust Dan again. And whatever is in the past—"

"Nothin' for him to be ashamed to tell yuh," interrupted Timmie.

"Will you saddle me a horse, Timmie? I'm going to Trinidad and find Dan."

Timmie's red face crinkled in a grin.

"Th' fastest hoss in th' stable, ma'am!"

Sue followed the right-of-way along the grade, retracing the trail of yesterday. Where last night it had lain quiet and motionless in the shadows, today it seethed with activity. Teams moved like an endless chain, dragging scrapers. Huge worms of earth squirmed up from the deep-cutting blade of the ploughs. There were shouts of men, the profanity of muleskinners, the rattle and clank of steel trace-chains. Red-shirted men heaved picks and shovels, short-stemmed clay pipes clenched in their teeth.

Sue had reached the cut-off leading from the grade to the Trinidad trail when she spied a horseman. She gave him no particular thought until the man, almost abreast of her, reined in, doffed his shabby black hat. He was a small, rat-faced man with shifty green eyes.

" 'Mornin', ma'am," he greeted politely. "Beggin' yore pardon, but are yuh Miss

Sue Langtry?" His green eyes shone.

Sue, surprised, reined in, nodded.

The man gave a sigh of relief.

"Glad I don't have to ride into camp. The's a feller there I don't want to see me. My name's Pete Larkin. Mr. Masters sent me to camp to give you a message in secret."

"A message in secret?" Her eyes widened. "What is the message?"

Pete looked about him furtively, as though to make certain no one overheard. A stunted growth of pines shielded them from the grade.

"He said I was to make shore Laramie didn't know he'd sent me. Him an' Laramie had a run-in last night in town an'—"

Sue caught her breath, her heart pounding in fear.

"What is Dan's message?"

But Pete Larkin was unhurried. He appeared a little impatient of Sue's interruption, said peevishly, "Ma'am, gimme a chance to tell yuh! Like I said, they had a run-in. Dan was with a girl whose sweetheart is in jail—jes' a friend, ma'am!" he added hastily. "A girl he'd knowed a long time. Well, Laramie meets him an' tried to egg Dan into drawin' a gun. Dan, bein' with a lady was handicapped—Laramie figgered thet. So Dan tells Laramie he'd see him today. Laramie, bein' th' coward he is, ain't takin' no chance of meetin' Dan on equal terms so—"

"Please, please!" cried Sue, her hands gripping the saddlehorn tightly, her face devoid of color. "Tell me what word Dan sent to me!"

"I'M comin' to thet, if yuh'll gimme a chance," said Pete impatiently. "Dan found out thet Laramie was comin' out here to th' grade camp so's he'd have an alibi while his hired hellions bushwhacked Dan in town. But Dan got wise. An' now, he aims to settle with Laramie onct an' for all. He aims to prove thet Laramie kilt th' man whose murder has been pinned on this gal's sweetheart—Molly McCaffrey, her name is. He needs yore help. He'll meet you on th' Pueblo trail soon's yuh kin get there. He's waitin' now."

"The Pueblo trail—where is it?"

"Hit th' main trail to Trinidad from here an' turn north. Three miles from where yuh come into th' Trinidad trail from here, yuh'll see a fork. Foller thet fork. Dan'll find yuh. He wants to make shore thet you'n him ain't seen together because he aims to use you to trap Laramie."

In the haste of her eagerness, Sue did not pause long enough to thank Pete Larkin. Fear and panic whipped about her nerves as she urged her horse into a gallop.

Through her chaotic mind, thoughts shuttled in a wild jumble. She did not question the veracity of Pete Larkin's story. It had been too straightforward, too logical for her to doubt its truth. But one disturbing thought did creep into vague recognition. She knew Laramie had intended that she ride to Trinidad—*why?* And to that question there seemed a logical answer: he wanted her to see Dan killed while he, Laramie, was in the grade camp. And she remembered what Dan had told her of Laramie's dirty methods: "He plots an' schemes an' hires somebuddy else to do his dirty work in a way nobuddy can prove Laramie's part in it."

Sue, keeping her horse at a gallop, was stared at by horsemen traveling the Trinidad trail. The traffic going her way was light. She reached the cut-off trail described by Larkin and turned into it.

It was a narrow, rutty trail showing signs of little use. It twisted about high boulders, crossed narrow gullies and led gradually into a sparse timber land. Bent forward in the saddle, eyes anxiously fixed upon the trail ahead, Sue suddenly

uttered a glad shout. A rider was breaking through the pines a hundred yards ahead. She pounded her boot-heels against her mount, urging him ahead at a lope. Then she drew rein sharply. The man who had ridden out into the trail was not Dan, but a stranger.

He cantered toward her, a rawboned, hatchet-faced man in a red shirt. He doffed his flat-crown hat as he came close.

"Dan sent me to wait for yuh, ma'am. He's had to keep under cover so's certain parties wouldn't know he's left Trinidad to meet you."

"Where is Dan?" cried Sue.

"Anyone see yuh take this trail?"

"No! No!" she cried with vexed impatience.

The horseman sat sidewise, waved a dirty hand in the direction of the thicker growth of stunted pines fifty yards beyond the trail.

"The's an old sod house in yonder. Dan's waitin' for yuh there."

Sue sat perfectly straight in the saddle, studying the man. He did not look like the kind of a man Dan would select as an aide; yet—

"Go tell Dan I'm here," she said quietly, now beginning to suspect that this may, after all, be a trap of some kind.

The man shrugged, wheeled his horse.

"I'll do what yuh say, ma'am, but he made it plain I was to stay here an' see thet yuh wasn't follered."

"Wait!" cried Sue, now convinced that her suspicions had been unfounded. "I'll go. You do whatever Dan told you to."

She urged her horse ahead, following the directions he gave her. The pines grew thick here. She had to lay out along her horse's neck to avoid the slap of the low branches. After riding a hundred yards into the thicket, she saw the sod house ahead. It's roof was less than three feet from ground level; there was neither window nor door to be seen from this end—the rear of it. Sue dismounted; tethered her horse to a tree and went ahead afoot. Caution impelled her to go slowly. Somehow, she could not down the suspicion that rose in her mind.

She turned the corner, advanced to the open doorway of the sod house and halted at the head of the short flight of steps.

"Dan!" she called. "Dan!"

Terror began to pound through her. Dan was not here. This had been a ruse to lure her—but for what purpose? Slowly, she backed toward her horse. Then, she heard swift movement behind her. Dry twigs snapped under the lunge of leaping feet. An arm went about her, held her tight. The voice of the horseman she had left on the trail said calmly:

"Take it easy, ma'am an' yuh won't git hurt!"

HIS arms were about her, pinioning hers to her sides. She could smell the foul odor of strong tobacco upon his breath. His rough beard scraped against her bare neck. She tried to find her voice and couldn't. The man stooped quickly, picked her up and carried her toward the doorway. She kicked and flailed her legs, but was no match for his strength.

He carried her down the steps, set her upon her feet and gave her a shove into the dark interior of the sod house. He stood by the door and said conversationally:

"Better take it easy, ma'am. Yo're goin' to be here fur a coupla days. Yuh'll find me'n Pete fixed it up nice for yuh. The's a blanket-roll, some candles an' matches. We'll see yuh git fed. Yuh can holler yore head off if yo're thet foolish. No one'll hear yuh."

He caught hold of the inward-opening door, pulled it shut and Sue heard a bar drop across it. She stood perfectly still there in the darkness, her heart beating like a trapped bird's. Then, she raised

her head, her body taut, her lips dry.

She said, as though looking at herself in a mirror, "You little fool! You should have known Laramie was taunting you into going to Trinidad!"

She was not aware she had spoken aloud until she heard the chuckle beyond the door.

"Smart feller, thet Laramie, ain't he, ma'am?" said her captor.

"Smart enough to get you and Pete Larkin hung for doing his dirty work!" said Sue, walking toward the door. "Don't you know what'll happen if it is learned that you've kidnaped me?"

"Shore," said the man. "But me'n Pete won't be here when thet's learned. An' yuh won't be thought of as kidnaped. Yuh see, Laramie had a dancehall gal write a note to Dan Masters. Th' note was signed with yore name an' it said yuh knew all about th' gals he'd loved an' left—" the man broke off, chuckled in amusement—" imagine a feller like Masters botherin' with gals! I reckon yo're th' first sweetheart he ever had!"

"And that note," cried Sue eagerly, "what was in it?"

"Why, yuh jes' wrote Masters thet yuh knowed about him bein' in Trinidad with Molly McCaffery. So yuh wrote yuh was through. Yuh was goin' back home. Yuh never wanted to see him again. I tell yuh, ma'am, Laramie is smart! Dan an' everybody else will figger yuh've left th' country. Mebbe Dan'll start trailin' yuh back home!"

"And what does Laramie gain by this?" said Sue in a tight voice.

"Ast Laramie. He'll be along here when he's made his alibi good. He won't leave th' camp for a hour or so after th' note is found on your cot, where it was left. I don't care what he gains. Me'n Pete git a hundred dollars apiece. Thet's all we're interested in."

Sue groped around in the darkness, following the walls until her foot struck a soft bundle. It was the bed-roll spoken of by her captor. She dropped to her knees, searched for the candles and matches, found them. She struck a match and lit the candle. It sputtered, leaped up in a tiny tongue of yellow flame. She walked around her prison twice, a helpless fear building up within her. It was useless to attempt escape. The walls had been made by driving large logs into the ground like piling. The roof-beams were heavy logs, likewise. She went back to the door and called out to her captor, but got no answer. After repeated calls, she knew he had gone. She hammered against the door, but it was unyielding. She went back and sat upon the bedroll to think.

How damnably clever Laramie had been. There was no reason for Dan to doubt the authenticity of the note. Especially if he talked to Timmie. Timmie would tell of her jealousy. He would think her saying she wanted a horse to go to Trinidad to find Dan was a pretense to hide her real purpose. And if Dan tried to find out where she had come from—he couldn't. She hadn't told him.

Laramie! She knew a cold shivering fear. "I'll get you!" he had said. She got up and paced the small room. The flickering candle cast her slim figure in grotesque shadow against the damp log walls.

No, Laramie wouldn't get her! She would kill Laramie. She had threatened it, now she would do it. She was a little startled at her own calmness in that resolve. She knew that she would kill him. There was no other way. She had never thought of killing a man; now that she thought of killing Laramie, he didn't loom in her thoughts as a man. He was a ruthless, conscienceless fiend. There was nothing he would not resort to to secure his ends.

She had no way of telling time, but two candles had burned out and a third

was half consumed when she leaped from where she had been seated upon the blankets. Dimly, she heard the *clop-clop* of hoofbeats. Her heart began to race. Hot and cold chills shivered her flesh. She had searched the room for a weapon of some sort, but there had been none. She raced now to the door, pressed her slim body close against the wall beside it. When it opened, she would make one dash for freedom!

SHE breathed in short little gulps, her body trembling from the tautness of her muscles. She heard the hoof-beats clearer now. Then, they stopped. Her pulse pounded against her temples like sharp little hammers. Her breath was tight in her lungs. Footsteps came toward the house!

The bar was lifted. The door swung inward. Sue made a flying leap, started up the stairs . . . strong arms encircled her. Laramie's laughter was gay.

"Sue, darling, were you running to meet me?"

She jerked backward and he released his arms. She fell into the room, sprawling. Even in that anger-blinded moment, she saw Laramie's dark, saturnine features limned by the yellow candlelight as he stood in the doorway against the outer darkness.

His arms were folded across his broad chest. A half amused smile kindled his dark eyes.

He said, his voice faintly mocking, "Remember, my dear, I told you that whatever a man was strong enough to take and clever enough to keep, belonged to him."

Sue climbed to her feet, her lithe figure half crouched, her eyes wells of mad fury, her breast heaving spasmodically.

"Dan will kill you for this!"

He laughed.

"Dan is on his way to find you my dear. He'll discover that you left on the work-train today. One of my dancehall girls made a trip—and I saw that she was dressed in corduroy breeches, gray shirt and sombrero. She was a blonde. Not as beautiful as you—nor so desirable. But there's enough resemblance for Dan to believe it was you. She made certain many people saw her leave. After all, Sue, wasn't that a better way to get rid of Dan? It's only temporaray. I could have killed him, of course. I may yet."

Laramie took a measured step toward Sue. She threw up a hand to smother the involuntary cry that rose to her lips, and then her breath sobbed out in a long, strangling cry. Beyond Laramie, framed in the doorway, stood Dan.

He spoke with a quiet, deathly calmness, "Yo're goin' to have a chance to, Laramie!"

For an instant it appeared Laramie had turned to stone, so motionless was he. Then, swift as a whirling panther, he pivoted upon a heel, flinging his body sidewise and down. Sue saw his hand lash toward the shoulder-holstered gun, saw the skirt of his long coat balloon out. Even as Laramie's hand jerked out with a gun, the dead air, stirred into motion by his coat-skirt, struck against the candle. The flame wavered, flickered, went out.

Held by horror for one long moment, Sue's muscles now untightened. With a shrill cry, she flung herself upon the kneeling figure of Laramie as his gun spat viciously. The acrid fumes of burnt powder burned her lungs, the sharp report hammered in her ear-drums. The second shot crashed. It, too, was from Laramie's gun. Sue had no sight of Dan. Her whole attention was concentrated upon Laramie.

She felt his body relax, topple beneath her. She heard him draw a long, shuddering breath. Then she was aware that Dan had hold of her, was lifting her up. Her thoughts were a mad jumble of panic-driven incoherency. She heard Dan's

voice, but she could not comprehend his words. Then she felt herself slipping away into a dark abyss.

IT couldn't have been more than a brief minute, before she heard Dan again. Vaguely, she noted the candle had been relit. She was conscious of an arm about her—Dan's arm. And there upon the bedroll lay Laramie. In the saffron light of the candle, his features were ghastly—made more so by the bitter, ironic smile that twitched his lips.

"You said . . . you'd do it, Sue," he said jerkily. "You did!"

Sue stared, horror-stricken, as his meaning seeped into her mind. She jerked her head to face Dan.

"Oh, dear God! I—I killed him!"

Dan drew her closer. His voice was shaken. "No, Sue. He shot himself. Your weight bent his arm just as he shot. If it hadn't, he'd have got me."

She put her face against his breast, her arms clinging to him, her sobs shaking her small body.

"Oh, Dan! How did you find me?"

But it wasn't until they were riding back to camp that he told her. She had remained outside the sod house, leaving Dan alone with Laramie. Dan came out shortly afterward, his face gray. He led her silently to the horses, helped her into the saddle.

"I knew when I was told about th' note, it was Laramie's doin'," he said as they rode along. "I made him believe I fell for it. I pretended to start for Trinidad an' look for you. I hid along th' trail an waited for Laramie. I follered him here. I'd a killed him sooner, only I didn't know where he'd had you taken. He was a hellion, Sue. Black as—"

"Dan, let's never mention him again," Sue said tautly.

They lapsed into a long silence. Stars sprinkled the cobalt-blue of the sky. Purple shadows swirled about them, and tiny creatures of the night filled the soft, warm air with their orchestration. Dan reached over and lifted Sue into the saddle before him.

"Sue, sweet, I didn't forget a preacher today. I left him in camp waitin' for us. A railroader's life is a hard one, Sue—for a woman. The'll be nights when you'll wait alone; days when you'll hate it. But, sweetheart, I'll make it all up to you, somehow . . . someday."

She cuddled her cheek close against his breast, her eyes lifted up to him through the starlight.

THE END

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"Take the baggage and begone!" Rage twisted the hard old face. "You're no son of mine."

The star-lit trail to an enchanted oasis of happiness was barred to Ann, because she lacked the strength of range-bred women. Could she prove herself and win—from the roaring death on hoofs—her heritage of love?

ROCKY was waiting outside, when Ann dismissed school. She had been conscious of his presence for the last ten minutes; her heart, in its quickened beating, had kept reminding her. And whenever she glanced through the window, and saw his tall figure lounging at ease in the saddle, a pulsing thrill had swept over her, beating even to the tips of her slender fingers. Rocky, the man to whom she belonged, to whom she had been engaged this past, glorious week!

Ann's feet wanted to carry her from the schoolroom, straight into Rocky Dane's arms, but she kept them sternly in check until the last lesson of the day was recited, and the hands of the clock stood exactly at four. Even then, she took time to button the smallest pupils into their jackets, to make sure no dinner buckets were forgotten, and to say good-night to each. And then, at last, she was

free—and alone with her beating heart.

Not long alone. By the time the last pupil had left the schoolhouse porch, Rocky was in the doorway, tall and straight and strong, his gray eyes shining beneath his dark hair, his wide mouth tender. The next instant he was inside, and Ann was in his arms, held close and secure. His wild heartbeats were just beneath her cheek, telling even more things than Rocky's voice was murmuring in her ear.

"Ann, Ann! How I love you! This love, it seems to grow, just as you grow sweeter."

He looked down into her face, with its peach-bloom skin, framed by the lush golden hair. "So sweet, Ann. It's hard to believe that you love *me!*"

Her arms went up about his neck, and her blue eyes, black-fringed by long lashes, were luminous with love and trust. "You must believe it!" she told him, vehemently. "For I love you—love you!"

He made a little exclamation, his arms tightened and held her, until her whole body seemed one with his. His lips closed on Ann's, bringing them to passionate life. The aching sweetness of that kiss throbbed in every pulse, in every fibre of her slim body. It set a tiny vein beating in her throat. It filled her with a strange golden warmth, as though life rushed, in a radiant tide, through her whole soft body.

Rocky still held her after the kiss died. His big hand stroked her hair, his voice murmured. "In just another month, sweet, you'll belong to me. School will be out, and we'll be married!"

"Yes," she whispered, and snuggled closer.

"Four weeks!" he went on. "A long time, darlin', but we'll fill them with plans. We'll tell Mother tonight, then the whole, soft body.

Ann's blue eyes grew a little fearful at that. Phoebe Dane, Rocky's mother, was such an efficient, grim sort of person, and she had always looked with disfavor on small, yellow-haired Ann.

ANN'S hands slipped down to catch Rocky's flannel shirt. "Rocky!" she breathed. "What if your mother doesn't like me?"

He laughed proudly, hugged her to him tightly. "Who could help likin' you—lovin' you?" he said. "You dear little sweet bit of loveliness?"

Ann's eyes were widely grave. "But whenever your mother looks at me, in church or at the sociables, she always acts as if she didn't approve. As if I were a helpless sort of creature that she wouldn't want to give house-room! And I'm not helpless, really, Rocky! I know how to work! I'm ranch-raised, after all!"

He laughed again—laughter always came easily to Rocky—and brushed a kiss on her yellow hair. "You don't look it, lovely! You're so little and dainty and sweet. You look as if you needed to be taken care of, needed protectin'. I reckon Mother's never happened to see a girl just like you. Her kind has always been—well, different."

A little bitterness and hurt made Ann's soft mouth quiver, as she remembered the red-headed girl who was always near Rocky's mother; the girl Phoebe Dane had openly said would make a good wife for her son.

"Different—like Mala Johnson?"

Rocky nodded. "Mother's always liked Mala," he said. "And Mala likes Mother; they make a good pair. But—" His proud gray eyes looked down into Ann's blue ones. "—once Mother knows you're goin' to belong to us, and gets to know you through these next two weeks, she'll be as proud as I am! So come on, darlin'! I brought your things over to the Box-D this afternoon, and Mother'll have supper ready when we get there!"

He brought her jacket, put it on, then

together they went out to the horses. As they rode over the trail together, with the world tangy and sweet with new sage and other growing things, and with the spring breeze gentle and balmy against their faces, it seemed to Ann that she was riding straight toward Paradise itself.

She forgot her dread of the austere Phoebe Dane, forgot everything except that she was with Rocky now, and that for the next two weeks, she would be living under the same roof with him—for, in her cycle of boarding around, it was her turn at the Dane's house.

The sun was low, tinting the sky with faint mauve and turquoise, as they topped the ridge that looked down on the Box-D. A prosperous, great ranch it was, with a roomy house, and many buildings, barns, shops and bunk-houses. But that wasn't what made Ann's eyes mist happily; she would have loved it all with the same wild joy, if Rocky had pointed out a homesteader's shack and spoke, as he did now.

"Here is it, darlin'. This is home."

She held out her hand to him, mutely, and he caught it, held it as they rode down the trail, skirting the fenced meadow that held a bunch of bawling cattle.

"We're not very proud of these—yet," Rocky grinned. "They're mountain stock that almost got starved out, and we got a chance to pick them up cheap. But with a few weeks fattenin', they'll bring a good price. If old Tarheel doesn't stampede 'em with that singin' of his!" and he laughed at the gray, shag-bearded old cowboy who was singing lugubriously:

"I had but two bullets, and of rustlers
they was four!
But I lined 'em up and shot, and then
there was no more!"

"Tarheel's been drinkin'," Rocky grinned. "He always lets his mind run to rustlers after he's had two drinks. And that means"—ruefully—"that I'll have to ride tonight. Tarheel won't be any good past midnight, and the rest of our boys rode into town for a dance."

"And these cows look restless enough to stampede!" Ann observed.

"They are," Rocky nodded. "Hungry and wild enough to be spooked at the drop of a hat. But let's forget that for a while," he smiled. "We're home, darlin'. And Mala's here, too," he added, pointing to the pinto standing at the hitch-rack.

Gently, he helped Ann down. "You go inside," he said. "I'll be there, soon as I put the horses up. And"—he pinched her pale cheeks—"don't act so scared-to-deathish. Nobody's goin' to hurt you, darlin' sweet."

SHE gathered courage from his touch, but she begged: "Let's not tell your mother till supper's over!" She didn't add what was topmost in her mind; that red-headed Mala Johnson might be gone, then, and not a looker-on. "Please, Rocky!"

"Sure!" he agreed, and patted her shoulder tenderly before he mounted, rode toward the corral, leading her horse.

Ann watched him tenderly for a moment, then walked slowly through the gate and up the path to the kitchen porch. Mala Johnson opened the door, and though her thin lips curved in a smile, Ann caught pure dislike in the greenish eyes that peered through stubby, sandy lashes. It made Ann feel small and weak and apologetic, for Mala towered more than half-a-head above her, and her shoulders were broad and sturdy.

"We've been waitin' supper," Mala said, ungraciously. "And Rocky don't like cold food."

"We came right after school," Ann returned, and went to greet Rocky's mother.

Phoebe Dane sat at the head of the

table, and she didn't get up when Ann approached her. Her gray eyes—like Rocky's, but lacking his laughter and tenderness—stared up at Ann from under tight-drawn iron-gray hair, and her mouth held its grim lines. In fact, she seemed all grimness.

"We expected you sooner," was the older woman's comment. Then she turned to Mala, "but as long's they're here, you can dish up. Reckon everything else can wait till after Rocky's eaten."

Ann's face flushed at the lack of welcome, and since no move was made to show her to the room she would occupy these next two weeks, she merely slipped off her jacket and bonnet, hung them on pegs along the wall. When she turned, Rocky's step sounded on the porch.

Ann happened to be gazing at Mala then, and she saw the look on the big girl's face, a look that made Ann catch her breath with realization. Mala loved Rocky, too, would stop at nothing to win him. All that was written in the girl's green eyes, on her freckled features. That was why she hated Ann so; perhaps why she had made Rocky's mother hate Ann.

But these thoughts melted as Rocky entered, for his presence seemed to sweep away petty things. To be near Rocky, Ann realized all at once, was like standing on a mountain top, watching the dawn! She smiled, showed the dimples that joy always brought to the corners of her tenderly-curved mouth.

Rocky smiled back, but he spoke to Mala with friendly good humor. "Did you want me to put your horse in the corral, Mala?"

"No! He's too ornery to saddle again."

"Well, I unloosed the cinch," Rocky said gravely. "It was so tight it must have been torture for him."

"Served him right!" Mala returned crisply. "Every time I try to put leather on him, he blows himself up till I can't fasten the cinch right. This time, I watched my chance, and when I got it, I tightened it enough to teach him a lesson. But now"—smiling archly at Rocky—"you'll have to help me do it over again."

"I will," Rocky returned, "but not as tight as you had it, Mala!"

"You're softhearted as a tenderfoot," Mala teased, as she set the biscuits on the table.

It was a happy meal for Ann, despite Phoebe Dane's tight, grim face, and Mala's jealous glances. Any place would have been happy for Ann, if Rocky was there. And when, at the end of the meal, Rocky reached over and openly caught her hand, the thrill of his fingers made her every pulse leap.

"Mother—and Mala!" Rocky spoke proudly, his voice high-banked with eagerness. "We've somethin' to tell you—somethin' mighty important. Ann and I—we're gettin' married as soon as her school is out, next month."

THERE was silence; a silence so heavy that even the echo of Rocky's boyishly eager tones seemed to die down to muddy dregs. Ann saw the bitterness and hatred that twisted Mala's face and, for an instant, she knew pity for the girl who loved Rocky, too.

Then Phoebe Dane straightened, and her whole face appeared carved from gray granite. Even when she spoke, the words seemed to come from closed lips and crack in the cold tension.

"Married? And where will you make your home?"

Rocky's gray eyes opened wide, and there was puzzlement in their depths. "Our home?" he echoed. "Why, here, I suppose. I— well, at least I thought—" and Ann saw the color draining slowly from his face. "If I'm to go on helpin' work our ranch, Mother—"

Her hard, steel-gray eyes were on

Ann's; the harsh words that came were meant for Ann.

"The Box-D is *my* ranch," Phoebe Dane said. "This home is mine. And it ain't big enough for two women—when the other woman ain't of my choosin'!"

Rocky came to his feet. His tones were quiet, steady, but the laughter had gone from his eyes, and his face had taken on some of his mother's granite-hardness.

"Mother," he spoke slowly. "I reckon I haven't understood, through the years. I've worked since I was a boy. I've given all my time and thought, and you've always talked of the Box-D as *ours*. *Our* home."

"Any papers to prove it?" his mother snapped.

Slow red crept into his lean cheeks. "I've never thought of papers. Everything just seemed to belong to the two of us, the way Dad would have wanted it. But if you don't want it that way—"

His mother's words broke in harshly. "Your father left an unproved homestead claim, with a shacklin' house on it, and a few head o' starvin' stock. I took it and made it what it is—somethin' to be proud of, to be inherited by sons of yours who come from strong women . . . not puny weaklings who'd birth puny offspring!" Her gaze swept Ann with contemptuous scorn. "Good stock—strong stock. It's what I've worked for. It's my right."

"Mother!" The quiet left Rocky then. "You don't know Ann! She's fine and brave—" his voice broke a little.

"A witless featherbrain! A pretty face!" the old one scoffed.

"Mother, you can't speak that way of the girl I'm going to marry. For the first time in your life, you're unjust. You'll know it, some day, and be sorry. But until then—"

"Until then, take the baggage and begone!" Rage twisted the hard old face. "You're no son of mine."

Ann was standing, too, now, and Rocky put an arm about her, drew her close. His face was very grave, but tenderness flickered in his eyes as he looked into hers.

"Ann," he said, huskily, "I'm sorry this won't be your home . . . but I know it doesn't make any difference to you, that we have to start from the bottom. I can work. I will work—for you."

Ann's yellow head was high. She smiled, and there were banners of courage in her blue eyes.

"I can work, too, Rocky," she said. "We can manage—together! And—" she stopped. She couldn't tell Rocky that it was a relief to know she didn't have to live under the same roof with Phoebe Dane; with this woman who had put up a wall of stone and bitterness and ruthlessness between them.

"We'll manage," he nodded, and smiled at her. Then he looked at his mother again. "I'm entitled to the wage of a common cowhand, at least from the time I was twenty-one; more than two years ago. That will come to a good deal. You can't deny me what's fair, Mother."

Mala Johnson pushed back her chair with a scraping, ugly sound.

"She can deny it!" she echoed. "You ought to be ashamed. Rocky Dane, choosin' another woman over your own mother!" Then, to Ann: "And you, you little yellow-headed schemer—would you take him away from his mother?"

Mala's face was so filled with viciousness that Ann lost all pity, but she put her slim hand on Rocky's arm as he started to speak, and kept her voice very low and quiet.

"I'm not taking Rocky away from his mother. She's pushing him out. Even then I'd not take him, if she needed him. But she doesn't. She just said she had built up the ranch alone, and surely she can manage it alone. That leaves Rocky free to build a new life."

"We'll go right away," Rocky nodded. "We can be married, now."

Ann looked up at him, and again that warm tenderness set her heart thudding. She turned back, just in time to glimpse the long look that passed between the two women; an understanding look that made Phoebe Dane frown for an instant before she spoke.

"Reckon if that's the way he wants his bed made, he can lay in it!" she said dully. "But—" She started to get up, then clutched the table with both hands, while a spasm of pain went over her face.

ROCKY started toward her, but Mala was first. Supporting the older woman, she looked at Rocky, and something in that green-eyed gaze seemed to shut Ann from the group.

"Your mother fell, late this afternoon," Mala said. "Old Tarheel spilled a bottle of harness oil on the workshop floor, and your mother stepped in it; fell and hurt her back. She didn't want to say anything until after supper, so she sent for me to take care of things, and she's set up all through the meal, sufferin', wracked with pain." Then she added, "And she's liable to be laid up for a long time."

"Mother!"

Rocky took two steps, put his arms about her and carried her into a bedroom off the kitchen. Ann started slowly after him, but Mala stood in the doorway, blocking the way. And Ann, as she stood there, recalling the look that had passed between the women, knew a growing wonder. Would Rocky's mother stoop to actual deceit?

She went to the table, began gathering up the dirty dishes. She had a handful of them when Rocky came back, his mother's voice following him sternly.

"I don't want no fool doctor messin' around! I won't have it! You can't take time to go for him, because you got to take that drunken Tarheel's place! You—"

"I'm goin' for Doc," Rocky said determinedly. "You can't tell how serious a back injury is!"

He came over to Ann, took the dishes from her, set them down, then drew her out on the porch. "Darlin'!" he said, his eyes pleading with her to understand. "This is the first time Mother has ever been really unjust. And now I know it's because she's sufferin'. That's like her—to be sufferin', and yet not say a word."

Ann wanted to throw herself into his arms, and beg him to hold her close, never to let anyone come between them. . . . but she only smiled up at him gravely.

"Don't worry, Rocky," she said, low.

"No, we mustn't worry," he said, but his tones sagged with weariness. "Mother will be all right, once she's herself again. She'll want us to marry, then . . . she'll love you, darlin'. You believe that, don't you?"

"Of course!" she told him, and tried desperately to believe what she said. "Of course, Rocky. Don't let anything worry you—except to get the doctor here!"

"You're sweet! So sweet!" Rocky breathed, and his arms crossed behind her in a sudden sweep of passionate love. "It's no wonder I love you so, darlin' dear . . . no wonder there isn't any sun or moon or stars, when you're not around!"

Then he kissed her, his lips crushing deep into hers, as if all the splendid strength of him, all the vital power of his hard, lean body had come forth through his lips. He was hurting her with the strength of his embrace, even his hard-pressing mouth was a pain . . . but it was a sweet pain that mounted to ecstasy. It changed the whole world, made the night draw near, to wrap them in star-spangled wings.

Ann was lost to everything but the mad enchantment of the moment. With

every fibre of her being, with every beat of her heart, she worshipped him. Nothing else in all the world mattered. To snuggle her head against his shoulder, to open her eyes and see, brighter than the blinking stars, Rocky's gray gaze, filled with the golden lights of tenderness . . . this was all that she wanted from life.

Then the moment was shattered into ugly, cutting bits. Mala spoke from the kitchen.

"Ann! Mrs. Dane wants to see you!"

ROCKY drew away, smiled down at Ann. "There!" he said. "I knew Mother would feel badly about the things she said. Go on in, darlin'. Mother wants to make up . . . she's really good, inside. I'll be back as soon as I can!"

Another quick kiss, then he was gone, striding toward the corral. Ann went back into the kitchen, and even Mala's angry gaze, tell-tale proof that the red-head had seen their loving, couldn't dim the glory of those last few minutes. The feeling of Rocky's arms about her persisted, and the warmth of his lips upon hers remained in tingling ecstasy.

Ann's eyes must have held star-glow when she went into the bedroom, for Phoebe Dane stared at her grimly a moment before she spoke.

"It's my turn to board the teacher," she said abruptly, from the bed, "but this accident makes it somethin' I can't do."

"But you'll need somebody here," Ann said. "Somebody to cook and look after things. And I can hurry home from school—"

"Yes. I'll need somebody to cook and look after things," the other broke in. "Somebody able to swing it. So Mala's goin' to come for the next two weeks and take charge, and she'll be in the room I meant for you. But I've already made arrangements for you to go to the Circle L; I sent your telescope over already."

Ann flushed, fought back the anger. If Mrs. Dane had sent her telescope over, then Mala had taken it, for all the cowboys, excepting Tarheel, were away. The red-headed girl had probably suggested the new arrangements.

"I reckon you may as well be startin' out," Phoebe Dane continued. "If you're too scared to be ridin' alone, then Mala will go a piece with you. Rocky can't be spared to do it. When he gets back, he's got to take Tarheel's place."

Ann's yellow head came up. "I'm not afraid," she said proudly. "The moon is out, and I'll ride through the gully."

The other woman's iron-gray head raised from the pillow. "No such thing!" she said. "That gully runs along the edge of the meadow, and you'd like as not start them new cattle to stampedin'; wouldn't take anything more'n a strange foot-noise to do it. You take the hill trail!"

"I'll say goodnight now," Ann said coolly, "and get started." Then, because she was only human, she couldn't resist a single parting shot at these two who were determined to keep her and Rocky apart. She said, "Rocky will keep me informed how you are, Mrs. Dane. And I hope the doctor brings you good news."

She still kept her yellow head high as she went through the door, but down at the corral, as she threw riding gear on her horse, the tears welled over from the deep blue eyes. And the stars that sprinkled the sky seemed blurred with the big, yellow moon.

She had known what the moon would be like tonight, and she had thought to ride under it with Rocky. "The moon will be built just for us, these next two weeks," Rocky had said. "Our moon—our world, honey darlin'!"

Now she was alone. And if Phoebe Dane or the jealous Mala had their way, she would be alone always. For what defense had Rocky against the planning of

the pair?—big, mannish Rocky, with his tenderness and respect for all women? Ann was sure that his mother's illness was feigned, but she couldn't tell Rocky; she couldn't try to make him believe wrong of his mother.

Hopelessness flooded Ann. She felt utterly defenseless against the granite-hardness of Phoebe Dane, and the ties of loyalty by which Rocky was bound to his mother. And Ann had committed herself by saying she wouldn't take Rocky away, if his mother needed him.

"A hurt back can't last forever!" Ann scolded herself fiercely, as she scrubbed the tears away. "She'll have to get over it some day!" All the same, it would mean delay, worry, and something else would follow the first injury. Phoebe Dane didn't look like a woman who would stop short of victory.

"Well, she won't have her way in one thing!" Ann said spiritedly, as she turned into the gully, "if she thinks I'm going to ride three miles extra, because of her cattle! I know better than to spook them, anyhow!"

She could hear old Tarheel's twang as he still sang, in a husky off-key, whiskey-warped voice, his tale of the cowboy who had shot four rustlers with two bullets; she smiled, remembering Rocky's laughter. Dear, blessed Rocky, whose eyes could so fill with tender lights, and whose lips upon hers could bring, even in memory, a warm surge of sudden, wild passion.

Thinking of Rocky, she didn't notice that old Tarheel's singing had stopped, nor hear the thud of his horse's hoofs as he rode at a wild pace to the edge of the gully. The first warning Ann had was when his belligerent voice whooped down.

"What ye doin' down there? Caught ye, didn't I—ye sneakin', plunderin' rustler!" Then came a string of oaths that made Ann tremble.

ANN called back. "Tarheel!" But her voice was drowned by the sudden, frightened bellowing of a steer. She called louder. "Tarheel! Be quiet! You'll start the cattle—!" but it was no use. Another steer joined the clamor, another —and still others, until the air shook with terrified bawling.

Ann started to ride up the gully bank, to get out of the shadows, where Tarheel's bleared eyes could recognize her—but it was too late. Moonlight flashed on metal and Ann wheeled her horse, sent him leaping to the gully bottom, just a split second before the gun roared, and belched an orange-flamed lance into the gully shadows.

Again the gun spoke, and there was nothing for Ann to do but quirt her horse around the bend in the gully, heedless of the clatter. When she was safely around it, the six-gun still barked on, sending the alarmed cattle into a frenzy.

Then came the sound Ann had been expecting—the rumble of hoofs, growing louder . . . louder. The cattle were stampeding, and if they couldn't be turned, they might break through the fence at the south corner, go piling over into the canyon.

Heedless of Tarheel and his gun, Ann sent her horse up the steep side of the gully, and out on the meadow. She didn't know quite what she could do, but she had to try something.

Standing in the stirrups, she saw Tarheel was racing along the west side, and she gave a sigh of relief. Danger had evidently shocked Tarheel out of his muzziness, and he was trying to get around the cattle, turn them away from that south corner, where danger lay. It might work. The meadow was bootshaped. If the cattle could be turned into the toe part, there would be a chance to start them milling. Her best help would be to cut over and join Tarheel. Together they might, with her shouting and his shoot-

ing, make the crazed animals swerve away from the corner.

Ann's course took her near the barn, and Phoebe Dane's voice carried to her from the yard. "I'll take your horse, Mala! You saddle up and come along quick! We got to turn them cattle!"

"It's dangerous!" Mala shrilled. "I won't do it—risk my life for a bunch of cattle! You're a fool!"

The older woman didn't answer, but glancing back through moonlight that set the world aflame with gold, Ann saw her climb into the saddle; stiffly, but not at all crippled. Then Phoebe Dane turned the horse into the lane. When Ann looked back again, she was in the meadow, racing across it.

Ann had fleeting desire that Rocky would come now, find his mother riding, instead of in bed, but she thrust it aside. For suddenly she realized what Phobe Dane was doing.

She was going to cut across the toe of the boot-shaped meadow, to get along the fence below the cattle, in a crazy attempt to head them away from the canyon. It was suicide, and Ann caught her breath at the sheer recklessness of it.

It was terror that made her catch her breath a moment later, when she saw the woman sway in the saddle, try stiffly to recover. For she remembered then what Phoebe Dane must have forgotten—that Rocky had loosened the cinch! And the saddle was slipping. The woman would be thrown in the path of the maddened, trampling cattle . . . Rocky's mother!

Ann leaned over her horse's neck, laid on the quirt, sent him galloping ahead—straight toward that other woman. Phoebe Dane was fighting hard to keep her balance, but it was no use. The saddle suddenly slipped far to one side, and she went tumbling to the ground.

Ann's frantic, white face lifted to see the cattle sweeping toward the lower end, into that toe part—as Tarheel rode into the other side, shouting, yelling, turning them! Phoebe Dane was rising stiffly, trying to move. But there was no mistaking the pain that wracked her now. Even in the face of impending death, she couldn't make her body move. And the cattle were a frenzied mass, horns tossing, throats sending forth ear-splitting clamor . . . sweeping on in a fatal drive toward the helpless woman—the woman who now meant so much to Ann.

Ann's breath was a pain in her throat now, as her eyes measured the distance. "Faster!" she cried to the horse. "Faster!" and she shifted her weight farther forward, over his neck, to help him on . . . up to Phoebe Dane, who waited with a face deadly white, but calm, under the moonlight. And even in that wild moment, Ann knew a queer thrill of admiration for the woman who could be so calm in such peril!

SHE swept her horse about, wheeled to where the woman waited, her hands outstretched, ready to give what help she could. Ann sent up a desperate prayer for strength. Then her body swooped down, a sturdy arm clutched Mrs. Dane, held her as the horse swept on—frantic on his own account, fighting with speed the advance of those flashing hoofs.

It seemed like an hour to Ann—that one awful moment when the breath of the steers was hot against her face, when the horse was struggling under his double burden, and the weight of the helpless woman was a hard pull against her shoulders . . . slim shoulders, but strong with the years of riding, of ranch-living that Ann had known.

But at last they made it. The herd swept on, into the toe-shaped lower end of the meadow, where they would be corralled. And Ann looked down at Phoebe Dane, saw that her face was white and twisted with pain. But she opened her

eyes, gave a grim smile, and panted out.

"Serves me right. My back was a little strained . . . and I pretended it was bad . . . just out o' cussedness. Now I deserve to have it plumb busted"

"I had no right to take the gully trail," Ann said. "I'm so sorry."

"Fiddlesticks! It was my fault for lettin' myself be talked into sendin' you away! And now, if you can get me to the house, some way—you seem mighty strong for your size—mebby I can make out to fix things up for you and my boy."

"You're brave—just like Rocky!" Ann said fiercely, as she bent and kissed the other. "And Rocky will never know—"

"Sure! He's got to!" his mother insisted. "Got to know what strong stock he's marryin'. Got to appreciate what he's gettin'!"

Mala Johnson's green eyes were stormy with anger as she came to help the injured woman into the house. But Phoebe Dane waved her off, used the same words to dismiss her, that she had spoken to Ann only a few minutes before.

"Reckon you may as well be startin' out," she said, "and I don't know as you'll be welcome back, either. The tales you been bringin' me about Ann, my girl, I don't need nothin' else to make me know they were wrong." Her eyes were hard.

So it was Ann who helped the injured woman to bed. It was Ann who rode out to the sobered Tarheel with Phoebe Dane's orders about the cattle. "Tell him it's the last time!" Phoebe said. "I've been soft about him, but I'm through, if he goes on another spree." But Ann knew, by the way Tarheel took it, that the threat had been made many times before. Phoebe Dane's heart, Ann was learning, had a lot of softness inside the hard shell. Her eyes misted as she thought of her man's mother.

Later it was Ann who took the doctor's orders, and planned that she would look after the older woman at night, while Rocky got someone to watch through the day.

And it was Ann, still later, who walked out on the porch with Rocky and slipped into his arms, knowing that sudden upsurge of joy in her heart as his lips bent to hers.

"Ann, Ann! I love you!" he whispered . . . and all the many stars that blinked in the golden light of the moon seemed to blur in a glory brighter than the sun . . . and there seemed to be music, and immortal peace, in the whole quivering, magic world.

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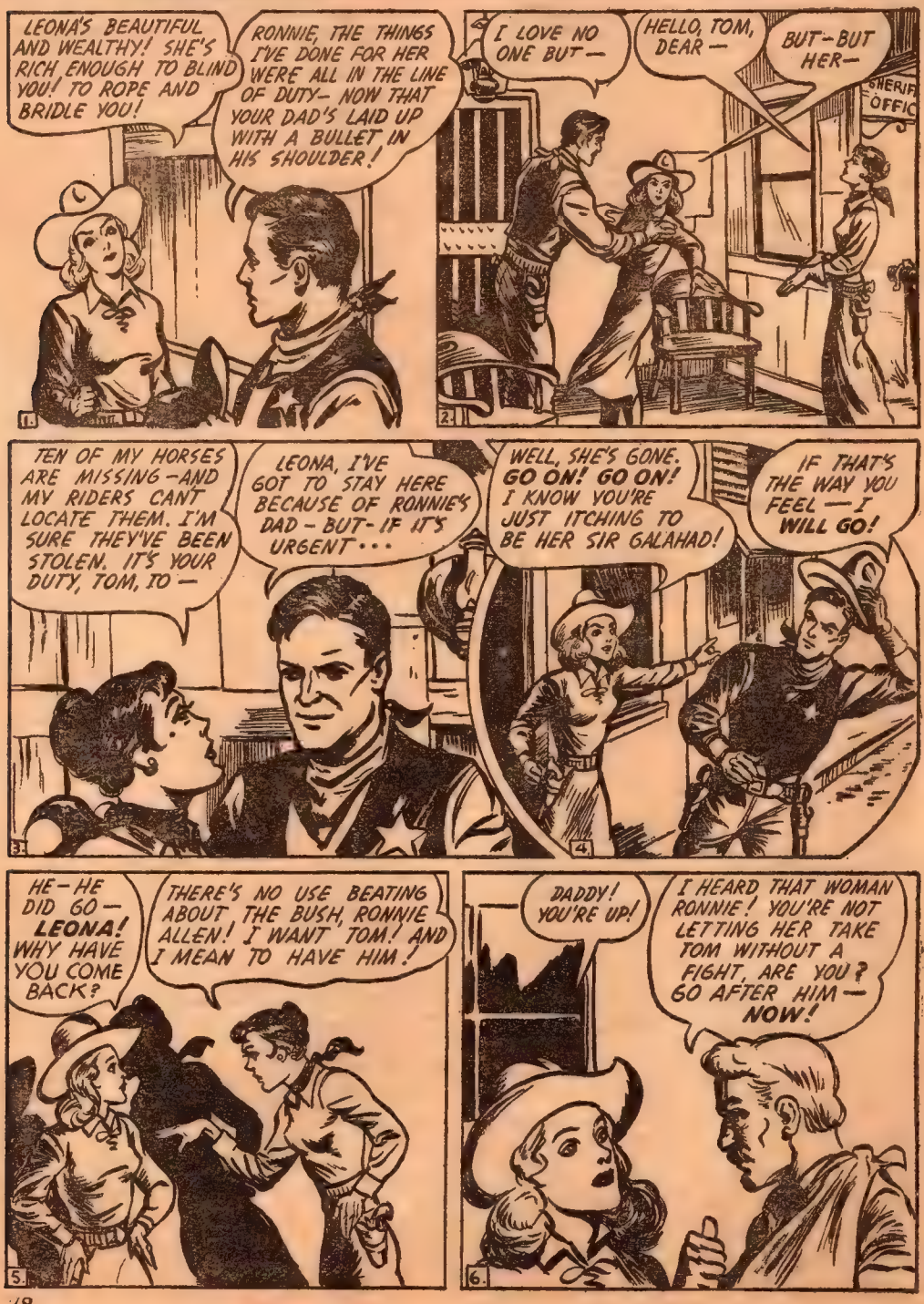
Love BOOK MAGAZINE

On sale March 20th

RONNIE ALLEN— FRONTIER HEROINE

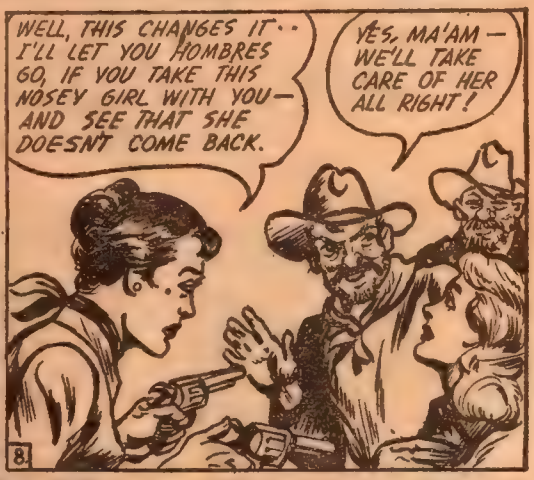

LEONA'S BEAUTIFUL AND WEALTHY! SHE'S RICH ENOUGH TO BLIND YOU! TO ROPE AND BRIDLE YOU!
RONNIE, THE THINGS I'VE DONE FOR HER WERE ALL IN THE LINE OF DUTY— NOW THAT YOUR DAD'S LAID UP WITH A BULLET IN HIS SHOULDER!
1.
I LOVE NO ONE BUT—
HELLO, TOM, DEAR—
BUT—BUT HER—
SHERIF OFFIC
2.
TEN OF MY HORSES ARE MISSING—AND MY RIDERS CAN'T LOCATE THEM. I'M SURE THEY'VE BEEN STOLEN. IT'S YOUR DUTY, TOM, TO—
LEONA, I'VE GOT TO STAY HERE BECAUSE OF RONNIE'S DAD—BUT—IF IT'S URGENT...
3.
WELL, SHE'S GONE. GO ON! GO ON! I KNOW YOU'RE JUST ITCHING TO BE HER SIR GALAHAD!
IF THAT'S THE WAY YOU FEEL—I WILL GO!
4.
HE—HE DID GO— LEONA! WHY HAVE YOU COME BACK?
THERE'S NO USE BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH, RONNIE ALLEN! I WANT TOM! AND I MEAN TO HAVE HIM!
5.
DADDY! YOU'RE UP!
I HEARD THAT WOMAN RONNIE! YOU'RE NOT LETTING HER TAKE TOM WITHOUT A FIGHT, ARE YOU? GO AFTER HIM— NOW!
6.

Rangeland Love Thief

A tabloid story of Western Love

By JON BLUMMER

THIS MUST BE TOM'S TRAIL FOLLOWING THOSE HORSE TRACKS
-OH!
KEEP THAT HAND OFF YOUR GUN, RONNIE! GET OVER ALONGSIDE THESE HORSE THIEVES, WHERE I CAN COVER YOU, TOO!
7.


WELL, THIS CHANGES IT.. I'LL LET YOU HOMBRES GO, IF YOU TAKE THIS NOSEY GIRL WITH YOU— AND SEE THAT SHE DOESN'T COME BACK.
YES, MA'AM — WE'LL TAKE CARE OF HER ALL RIGHT!
8.

Roxy Freeman's lonely heart broke the day they made Johnny sheriff, for her dead mother's ghost forbade marriage to a "badge-totin' killer."

"I'll not marry him," she cried. "I'll not love a killer. And that's what he is—a badge-totin' killer!"

No Sweethearts For Lawmen

By Jack Bechdolt

ROXY FREEMAN sprang from her desk at the sound of distant shouting. Far down the street echoed the sudden "Ta-ra-ra, oomp-oomp" of the Cactus County band.

"They've counted the votes," she gasped. "Johnny's elected!"

The excited color drained slowly from her oval face. Eyes that were ordinarily brown pools of laughter; eyes that could quickly soften with understanding and sympathy, became staring with heartbreak.

"It's settled," her lips whispered. "He's sheriff—and my heart's broken."

The clarion call of red-faced bandsmen echoed a jigtime paean down the street of box-like, false fronted houses and stores. In the distance was the glow of torches and the sound of marching men, shouting as they marched.

Judge Bacon, three hundred pounds of him, sleeping untidily at his broad-topped desk, opened eyes that were little round pin points in a sea of face. In one swift, coordinated movement fat hands brushed

tobacco ash from his vest, tugged at the lapels of his lawyer's frock coat and tossed back his famous lock of gray hair. Quick and soundless the mountain of flesh was out his chair, across the room and peering with Roxy into the street.

"A big day for Joshua Springs," the judge's voice boomed at her shoulder. "Big day for all Cactus County. Now we've got a young sheriff that'll carry on the fine work his Pa began. A happy day for you, Roxy my dear!"

There was no answer from the slim girl who stared at the approaching commotion, dry eyed, her lovely face paper white, small mouth set in tragic rigidity.

The crash and boom of the band was making windows rattle. Torches turned the little street light as day, showing the knot of shouting men who pulled a livery hack. Seated on the folded back top a grinning young man, with a flame of red hair, waved his sombrero in triumph. His eyes turned eagerly to Judge Bacon's law office. He saw the figures in the door and shouted, "Roxy!"

She couldn't look at him without her heart turning a somersault. He was so handsome in the torchlight, flushed with victory. That wide grin was irresistible—and she had always loved him . . . always.

"Hold it, boys." Johnny Rowe sprang to his feet. He spoke briefly to the grinning crowd, thanking them for their belief in him and pledging himself to carry on the work begun by his sheriff father, killed in the performance of duty.

"That's all—and goodnight," he said, and, springing down from the hack, shoved his way toward Judge Bacon. But, as he moved, his eyes were only for the judge's little secretary and law clerk, who stood there so strangely rigid, so tragic.

Bacon grasped Johnny's outstretched hand, then looked from him to Roxy. "I am prompted to step down the street and get boiling drunk for joy," he announced. "I trust you will excuse me." He left, a mountain of a sturdy man, walking fast and softly as a mouse.

Johnny had her hands in his. He drew her into the office. Her lack of response to his jubilation made him turn on her, suddenly apprehensive. "You haven't told me you're glad. I'm elected, Roxy! Overwhelming! Biggest tribute to my father a man ever got!"

"Yes," she said, her voice strange.

"Now look here, honey, you don't really mean what you said the other night?"

"I do mean it. You're sheriff now. The law's given you a license to go around killing. And I'm not going to marry a killer! I mean every word of it."

JOHNNY ROWE'S head snapped up at her words. He went gray under his tan; the charming, boyish look gave way to set hardness. "I told you why I was taking this job—if they wanted me. I promised my father before he died I'd carry on his work and make this county peaceable—"

"And I told you I would never marry a man who took human life. Because I want love and a home—and security. Every woman wants that. And I'll not have my life one long torture of doubts every time my husband walks out of the door."

"A man's got his work to do. If you say that, you don't love me!"

"I do love you!" Her voice broke on a sob. Her hands twined as she suffered the racking pain this gave her. "I will love you all my life—but I'll not marry a murderer. Law or no law—I'll not give my love to a killer."

A moment of silence came, while they stared. Johnny's shoulders straightened slowly as he breathed deep. 'If I'm obliged to take a man's life enforcing the law, I aim to do it," he said. "So I guess that's that."

An hour later Judge Bacon peeped into his little office with tipsy wariness. What he saw turned him cold sober. Johnny wasn't there, only Roxy. And Roxy's face was hidden in her arms as she sprawled across her desk. Her trim little body was racked by sobs.

"I'll not marry him," she cried, burying her head against the judge's mountainous shoulder. "I told him so. I'll not love a killer. And that's what he is—a badge-toting killer!"

The story came out of her, prompted by affectionate pats of the judge's pudgy hands.

"We had one sheriff in our family—my own father! Mother lived through fifteen years of hell, not knowing what hour, day or night, he'd be called out to buckle on his guns and shoot it out with some worthless scum. She sat at home, hour after hour, trembling at every sound, dying a thousand deaths while time dragged! And then, that day at last, when it all came true—when they carried him in dead from a rustler's ambush! I was a child, but I remember! I suffered with her. I'll never do it again."

"We've got to bring law to this country, honey," the judge sighed. "Yes, even if it means killing. Your Pa knew that; Johnny's Pa knew it; Johnny knows it, too. Better to be the killer, than see the things you love and stand for killed."

Her face showed traces of tears, but she looked at him dry-eyed. "I'm not marrying a killer. I don't believe in taking human life."

IN THE hot peace of the following day, while Judge Bacon sighed ponderously over a brief he was preparing, and Roxy searched bound volumes of decisions for his precedents, the stillness was broken by boots pounding on a board sidewalk. A man thrust his head in the door.

"Hi, Judge! Johnny Rowe just took Shanty Ed. He's taking him over to jail, now. Slickest gunplay you ever set eyes on. Caught him at the bar and pulled a lightning draw before Ed could touch a gun. Not a shot fired."

Roxy, who was half out of her chair, sank back, limp. When the tale of the bloodless victory had been told and discussed and they were alone, she made one bitter comment, "It's begun. Every day will be a year of suspense. No man who loves a girl would put her through that."

It had begun, as she said, the surprising career of Johnny Rowe. Within the week came half-a-dozen more incidents, showdowns that caught slick gunmen a split second too late in their reaching. The little jail grew crowded and as yet not a shot had been fired, or a drop of blood spilled.

These prisoners were the hired rats of higher-ups, cattle buyers who dealt in wet stock; who grub-staked hungry bandits; who bribed, and supplied perjuring witnesses to keep their henchmen clear of the law—and took their big cut in the profits of outlawry. Everybody knew that Johnny was not content with these small fish. Johnny was going after the higher-ups. Everybody talked about it.

Within a month he rode into town with his first big prize—Bowden, whose ranch was a blind for a rendezvous of crime in the dusty, far north corner of the county. Days and nights Johnny had lain out watching with a field glass, learning Bowden's ways. One morning, stepping from his house, Bowden fell into Johnny's trap and reached for his guns too late. Johnny had driven the hard barrel of a .44 into his stomach. And Johnny had methodically collected the evidence that sent Bowden to safe keeping.

The Kling brothers were next, taken by the sheer effrontery of a red-haired young devil, who walked into their rendezvous with hands ostentatiously empty. Both men threw down on Johnny, but too

late to stop the hard fist that drove Jake's 240 pounds of brawn into his brother. Jake's wild shot blew out the lamp and they finished it in the dark. When Johnny commanded lights from a trembling hired man, both Klings were pulpy and bloody —but no lives had been lost.

Many versions of all this came to Roxy as she worked in Judge Bacon's office, when she gossiped with neighbors about her little log home, when she traded at the store or went to church. But no Johnny came back.

Bent over her desk in the office, she saw Johnny passing now and then. When he came in sight she ceased to breathe. The world hushed and faded from her, so that she saw only red hair glinting in the sun, a brown face that was losing its boyish look forever, steadfast eyes that never glanced her way.

"He knows it's no use looking at me," she thought. "And it isn't . . . not the least bit of use. Not while he wears that badge and carries guns to kill."

DAY time resolutions didn't lessen the horror of the nights. Nights when she could not sleep for thinking of Johnny, and the new title that had been tacked to Johnny's name by the admiring county, "The sheriff who never fires a shot."

"But he's got to shoot sometime," Roxy moaned. "Someday he's got to kill, before they kill him. Why does he have to make a fool of himself like that!"

She stopped, aghast. Almost she had been praying—praying that the man she loved would turn into the killer she despised.

Next morning a commotion outside brought Judge Bacon to his door, Roxy staring over his shoulder. Johnny was riding by. Beside him, on a led horse, was a chunky, thickset, heavy-jowled man, whose light gray eyes were vacant.

"It's Vasco," the talk ran. "Vasco, the killer! Johnny caught him in his blankets before he could wake up and draw."

Roxy knew Vasco's story. The man was mad. He hid out like a beast, unwashed, unshaved, a homicidal lunatic who killed for the lust of killing.

The vacant eyes, glittering like twin moonstones, met her own in a long glance. Vasco's red, moist lips curled in a slobbering grimace. Icy terror gripped Roxy at that glance.

An hour later she looked into different eyes—Johnny's. When he entered the law office Judge Bacon departed, muttering about the necessity of a drink. Johnny's arms were out to her and in the sudden flash of thankfulness that he was unharmed, she came into them and forgot everything in his eager kisses.

"Roxy," Johnny pleaded, "give me back your promise. Say you'll marry me. I haven't killed, have I? I promised you—like I promised myself—I'd do this job without killing."

She pushed him from her, putting aside temptation. "Oh, how can you say that? You know sooner or later you've got to kill . . . or be killed! Give up the job, if you want me."

Johnny sighed and his face turned hard again. "I can't quit the job. I'm finishing father's work—bringing law to this county." She did not see him leave because of the tears that blinded her, drenching her heart.

Blazing afternoon sun made a furnace of the street and nobody who could find shade remained out. The window blinds of the little law office were pulled low, the rear door open for ventilation. Judge Bacon was pleading a case in court and Roxy worked alone. She worked fitfully, interrupted often by the tears that came each time she thought of Johnny Rowe's stubbornness.

Something moved in the quiet behind her. A blind, swayed by a puff of wind? It moved again. A board creaked. She turned.

He was standing not a foot from her, a gun in his hand, his moonstone eyes glinting, red lips slobbering—Vasco!

Back at the jail that had held him, a guard was dead. That, she would learn later. But now they were alone. The windows were blinded. The town was taking siesta.

Before she could scream, a big hand clamped over her mouth. Vasco forced a handkerchief between her jaws and knotted it tight.

"Now write," he said, his hand gripping her shoulder cruelly. "Write like I say, if you don't want to die. I'm out killing today, and I'm killing Johnny Rowe first off—and I need you. Write like I tell you."

Something started to rap sickeningly in the girl's head. Here was the thing she had feared. This man was going to murder Johnny—and Johnny wasn't going to have a chance to defend himself. It was all her fault. Her shameful, obstinate pride would bring the boy she loved to his death—and it would be she who would kill him.

Rage exploded in her brain and she jammed her body backward against Vasco. Mewling sounds came from her clamped jaws as she tried to propel her body toward the door. Somehow, she would warn Johnny. She must!

But then a horrible physical pain broke out in her left arm. Vasco's cruel fingers were pushing her forearm slowly up her back. The pain almost made her sick to her stomach. She knew her arm was breaking. Then she couldn't stand it any longer. . . . She felt herself being hoisted back into the chair.

Sobbing, she took pen and paper. Somehow, she thought, as her brain staggered and reeled, she must keep alive—keep alive to try to save Johnny.

"Say this," Vasco dictated. "Say to Johnny Rowe: 'Meet me at the old Seven Up mine. But don't bring your gun. Please, Johnny.'"

Dazedly, Roxy wrote it, hardly knowing what the words meant. Vasco seized a blotter, dried the ink and put the note in his pocket with a vacant chuckle. He dragged the girl from her chair, examined the old fashioned wardrobe in the corner, pushed Roxy in and turned a key in the lock. Then he slipped out the rear door.

Roxy scarcely had room to breathe. The door was not heavy and could be broken easily if she only had space to lunge in. Suffocating with heat and dust she began a fearful struggle, trying to force the lock with her shoulder. When it broke at last, the little alarm clock on her desk showed nearly an hour wasted.

Frantically she whirled the primitive coffee mill telephone. "Johnny Rowe . . . Johnny!" The words were muffled by the gag, but Sylvia, the town central, understood at last. "Johnny just rode out of town, hell bent. What's wrong? Hello . . . hello . . ." Sylvia's unheeded demands squawked tinnily from the telephone receiver Roxy had left dangling.

Johnny had Vasco's note and had gone to help her!

Roxy opened a drawer of Judge Bacon's desk and grabbed the .44 that lay there—the spare gun that the old man didn't carry at his hip. Now she had to find a horse.

Not ten minutes after her departure Judge Bacon, returning for a forgotten paper, found the door wide, the wardrobe smashed, a chair overturned, ink dripping from an upset bottle on Roxy's desk.

His shrewd, old eye noted a clean blotter that had dried the decoy note. He held the blotter before the mirror over the corner wash stand, rounded his lips in a soft whistle and scuttled, soft footed and swift, out in to the street. His little eyes glinted strangely.

ROXY came onto the old Seven Up from the summit of the hill.

Vasco and Johnny were just in front of the ruined shaft house, Vasco crouching, slobbering, his vacant eyes terrible as he waved his gun.

Johnny stood rigid, weaponless.

"Not a mite of hurry," Vasco was chuckling. "Got till sundown. I'll just drill you here and there—and then I'll cut the living heart outa you."

The killer's gun steadied. Roxy saw his finger tighten on the trigger. Her own hand levelled Judge Bacon's gun.

There was a roar like cannon fire, a prolonged, echoing bellow from the guns. Smoke blinded her. Her arm was shocked numb. Then, through the choking cloud, she saw that Vasco lay on his face, kicking convulsively . . . then he was still.

She had killed a man, but she didn't think of that. Coming pell-mell down the steep bank she jumped across Vasco's slumped body.

"Darling . . . oh my darling . . . you're alive!" She clung trembling, in Johnny's strong arms.

Vasco was dead. It was her doing. She had taken a life. There would be a time when Roxy would remember that, but remember it only with a vast surge of thanksgiving in her heart.

Judge Bacon was alone in his law office that night when Doc Holliday the coroner, dropped in. The judge was cleaning and oiling his old-time six shot .32.

Doc set a twisted slug of lead before the old man. "See that? It's the bullet Roxy plugged Vasco with. But the funny part of that is, this is a .32 bullet. How come when she packed your old .44?"

The old man raised his head, exposing a vast, blank face.

"And what's more," said Doc, and put beside the first bullet a second, "Here's one I dug out of a plank in the old shaft house. A .44 slug."

"H'mmm, damn funny, Doc!"

"I never did believe Roxy could hit the side of a barn with that .44 of yours. It kicks like a mule. But you, you fat old scoundrel, according to your own story you was there, packing a .32!"

"Doc," said the judge slowly, "Not to change the subject, but do you remember your first six years in this town you were practicing medicine without a state license? I wouldn't tell that story on you for worlds . . . not unless you happened to mention this business about bullets to Roxy. If ever you do—"

"You're a blackmailing old shyster," Doc roared, his face red. "But of course if you want Roxy to think her shooting finished Vasco—"

"I do," the judge nodded solemnly. "Just what I do want. You might say it's a sort of wedding present to the girl . . . and one I hope'll do her a lot of good."

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

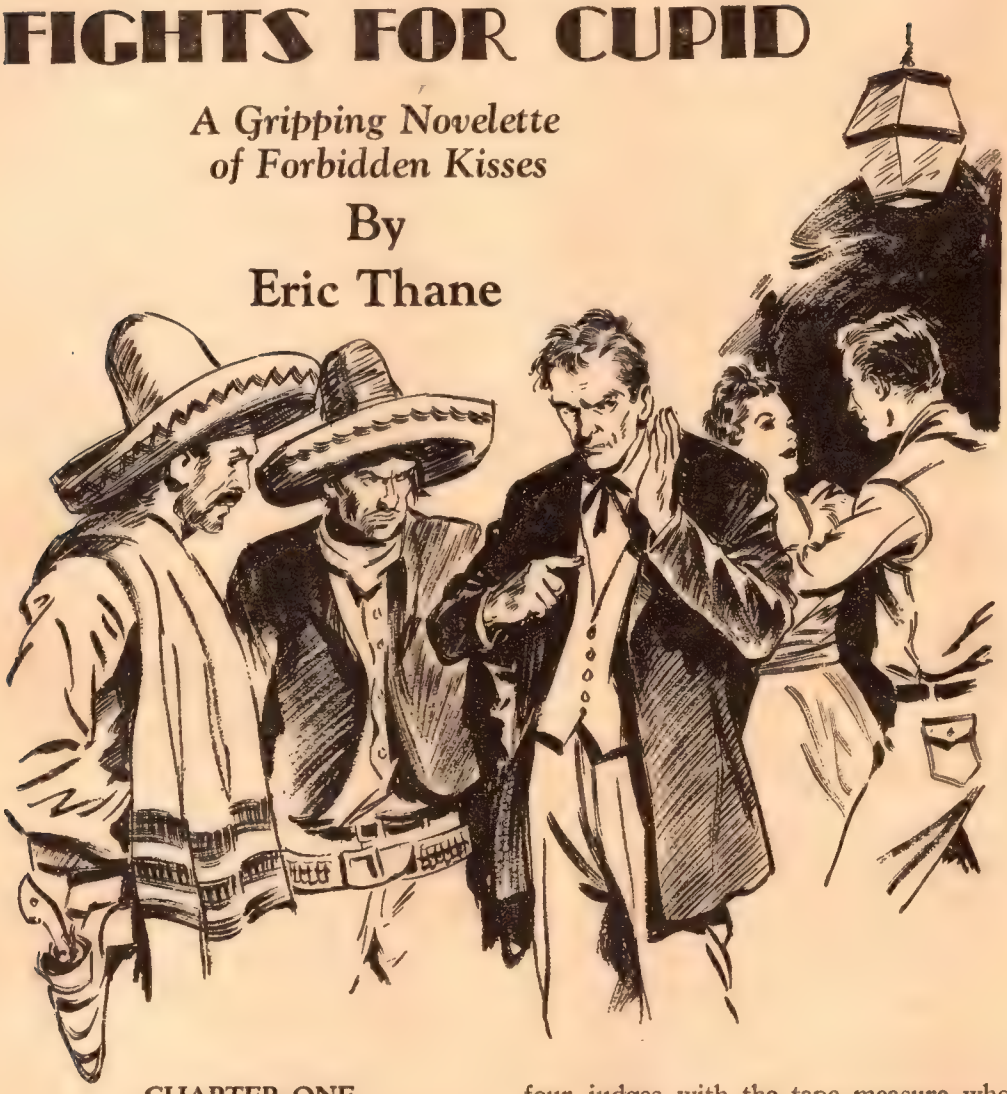
You, too, may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you, too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 151, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use, too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 151 Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

THE SEÑORITA FIGHTS FOR CUPID

A Gripping Novelette of Forbidden Kisses

By

Eric Thane



CHAPTER ONE

Broken-Hearted Señorita

THERE was such a big, bitter lump in Juana's throat that she couldn't swallow at all, and tears misted her dark eyes so damply that most of the flash and color and excitement of the fiesta were lost to her. The *Mejicanos* dancing wildly to the guitar orchestra, the *Americano* cowboys who squatted all around and kept time with their palms, the four judges with the tape measure who approached Juana and a dozen other girls—all were outside the veil of her tears. As was even Señor Croff, the *muy rico* Americano who owned as many acres and cattle as there were silken hairs in Juriana's dark head.

She should have been able to see Señor Croff plainly, of course, since he was partly the cause for her grief. He and Santos shared that responsibility between them. For Tio Santos, her uncle had been made her guardian soon after the death

Would the wealth of lustrous black hair that was little Juana's glory bring her only the man she despised? . . . Or could she capture—and hold forever—the dashing American whose prodigal kisses she could not live without?

Juana's very high heels slipped into the rhythm of the music.

of her father and mother three months ago, and Santos had brought her up here, north of the Rio Grande into the Americano country. Under Juana's voluminous sleeves there were bruises on the smooth, soft skin where Santos' talons of fingers had gripped her to force her to do as he said.

That had been to dress herself in her best, come to the fiesta which Señor Croff was giving, and there enter the contest. The contest. . . !

An Americano cowboy who was standing beside Croff now called out for silence. The dancing and music ceased while the celebrants crowded expectantly around him. His voice boomed loudly against Juana's ears.

"Folks, we're comin' to the big event of this fiesta—the contest to find the lady who's got the longest hair in the country!

The prize will be ten Mex dollars, given by our boss, Señor Croff!"

There was a spattering of applause, then all eyes turned toward Juana and a dozen girls who had been standing a little apart from the rest. They were young, beautiful, with long, black hair cascading down over their shoulders. All of them had bold and roving eyes—except Juana, whose eyes couldn't be bold and roving because of the tear-mist over them. Her eyes wouldn't have been bold anyway, because her nature was not bold. She was just a little Spanish girl, frightened now, but resolute, too. She stood very straight and tried to make herself tall while the judges with their tape measure came up.

"—the longest hair in the country!" the announcer called. "An' a prize to the winner!"

Juana's small hands, almost hidden by her long sleeves, clenched until her palms hurt. She wanted more than anything to weep, but she could not—before all these people! Besides, Castilian blood ran almost pure in her veins, and her father and mother and their fathers and mothers before them would have been shocked had any member of the family permitted herself to lose control of her feelings. So Juana stood straight and gulped down the big, bitter lump in her throat, and thought of what Tio Santos had told her just before the fiesta.

"You shall dress yourself in your best, my little one!" he'd ordered, his heavy face a-glow with his idea, "Then you will enter the contest for the longest hair. You will win, I know. Then the Señor Croff, who has looked favorably upon you, will perhaps make love to you and marry you!"

Juana shuddered a little.

THE Señor Croff—tall and thin as a skeleton, with burning eyes that weren't altogether sane and scarred hands that reminded Juana of the talons of a buzzard. . . .

And the way he looked at her whenever he passed her on his horse, lifting his hat with an over-elaborate gesture and saying in his slurred voice, *"Saludo,* my pretty one!" with more of a leer in his manner than friendliness.

But he liked her, that much was evident. And Santos wasn't long in sensing it, or taking advantage of it. . . .

"The Señor Croff has lately lost his fourth wife," he'd told Juana, "and now he looks for another. I know he has a great fondness for long and thick hair, and in the contest at the fiesta he will see yours! He will pay court to you. And should he marry you, he will settle much money upon me, your guardian, as is the custom."

Then he added, voicing a threat he made at least once a day, "Do not think you can run away! I am your uncle, and the mayor of Santa Rita down south of the Rio Grande made me your guardian when your father and mother drowned in the great flood. I must look out for your welfare!"

"You—you paid the mayor to make you my guardian!" Juana returned, stirred to anger, though it was unwise to irritate Tio Santos. "You wanted to have a hold on me so you could marry me off to some rich man and get a settlement—"

"Hold your tongue!" Tio Santos cut in roughly. "I will take no such words from you. . . . Hasten to prepare yourself for the fiesta. You will wear the dress of your mother!"

"But—it is not a dress for this sort of thing!"

"That is my order. You must please the Señor Croff in every way possible. See that you do, Or else—"

Santos' uplifted arm carried a threat not possible with mere words. Juana slunk back into the other part of the double-

roomed hut in which she and Santos lived, her heart sick. The dress was her mother's wedding garment, and long ago it had been laid away for Juana's marriage. Now, to wear it to further the evil plans of Santos. . . !

But Santos' dark face and threatening eyes had the power to overcome her horror, and a few minutes later Juana lifted the filmy garment from an old chest and slipped into it. There was a cracked bit of mirror on the wall and Juana's feminine curiosity led her to view herself.

The view was satisfactory! A slender girl, with dark lashes arched in the proud Castilian manner, and a face softly touched with the gold of the sun, with a wild cascade of hair as black as the obsidian the Indians brought out of the mountains. And such sad, sad eyes that grew sadder every day except when she thought of, or saw—Jerry Alder. But there was heartbreak in that, too.

For she didn't even know Jerry Alder, and what was worse, he had a girl. A tall Americano girl whom Juana thought of as "Jeel"—Jill Latham. Sometimes Juana said the name, and followed it with the other name that meant so much to her.

"Jeel and Jerr-ee!"

Juana didn't know much about him, except that he was a top hand for one of the outfits to the east. Someone said he was an expert with a lariat; could make a rope almost stand up and talk. Juana had never had the opportunity of speaking to him, for Tio Santos watched her closely, but once Jerry had stopped and smiled at her in a very friendly manner. Immediately then, he'd moved on when Santos dropped a hand to the knife in his belt and growled. "My ward ees not for you, vaquero! She weel have notheeng to do weeth you!"

". . . . all right, folks, the judges'll measure the hair of these glorious señoritas before you!" the announcer was blaring now. "Watch 'em!"

The other girls around Juana were prenning themselves and throwing self-conscious glances at Señor Croff who slumped in a chair. The prize was more than ten Mexican dollars to them. Much more! They knew that Croff admired long hair, and might look with favor upon the winner of this contest. Yes, they were after more than ten Mex dollars. . . .

Juana felt hands in her hair, and a tape measure down her shoulders. Suddenly her vision cleared to admit the sight of a pair of level blue eyes that made her heart behave queerly. For Jerry Alder was standing there watching her! Always before, his look had been mildly personal, but at this moment it was more than that. It was thrillingly intimate. . . .

SUDDENLY Juana was glad and sad at once—glad for Jerry's sympathetic look, sad because he had another girl. The thought always made Juana choke with a bit of a funny kind of fear.

"Oh, Jerr-ee!" she whispered in the Americano tongue which she'd learned only since Santos had brought her north of the Rio Grande. "Jerr-ee, I—I theenk I—I love you!"

She held his look, while the judges fumbled with her long hair and muttered among themselves. Then Juana was conscious of a stir, a flare of hostility upon the part of the other contestants. She shook herself free from Jerr-ee's eyes. What was happening? And then she discovered that everybody was looking at her, and the judges had grouped themselves around her.

"The longest hair in the country!" the announced boomed. "Juana wins! Come up an' get the prize, Juana!"

Someone took her arm and Juana, suddenly horribly self-conscious, was led before Señor Croff. And at once everything she'd heard about him occurred to her now—the way he'd double-crossed his friends, and his lack of principle when it

came to women. He'd had four wives. It was whispered that he had poisoned one of them, and driven another out into a storm to her death. Always, Juana had dreaded him. And now to be forced upon him, in hopes that he would approve of her enough to marry her—

"*Saludo,* my little beauty!" Señor Croff said. "You have the longest and most beautiful hair I have ever seen. You well deserve this!"

He held out the small bag of gold, and Juana, keeping her eyes on the ground as her mother had taught her to do when addressing great gentlemen, bowed in the manner her mother and her mother before her and *her* mother had no doubt bowed.

"I thank you, Señor Croff. Eet ees very kin' of you to geeve me thees mon-ee. I thank you ver' much—"

Then she lifted her eyes to Señor Croff, and shuddered at the approval in his look. His tongue ran over his lips, and his crooked grin was wide with satisfaction. His hand came out and Juana, gritting her teeth, politely placed her own warm, soft palm in it.

"Ho, music, strike up!" Croff called. "I must dance with my little Juana!"

"*My*" little Juana! Juana's flesh crawled. To dance with him, to feel his loathesome arms around her... ! Wildly, she attempted to think of some excuse, but she was frozen when Croff put his arms possessively about her.

Then the music struck up and Croff's arms tightened. But only for an instant. Croff's voice, petulantly furious, broke in upon Juana's consciousness. There was another man, even taller than Croff, suddenly beside him, and the tall man was taking Croff's arms from Juana.

"My dance, Croff! Sorry—but Juana an' I planned on havin' the first dance after the contest!"

"Alder, you—"

Alder! All fright left Juana, and suddenly she was so warm that she was almost uncomfortable. The warmth was caused by Jerry Alder's arms about her, the speed with which he spun her through the dance. Juana's very high heels, which she'd worn to make herself taller, caught for an instant then slipped into the rhythm of the music. She and Jerry Alder might have been dancing together all their lives, to judge by the way they moved instinctively as one.

Juana didn't look up at him, but closed her eyes and swam in an ecstasy. She didn't need to debate with herself now whether she loved him or not—she was sure she loved him! She forgot Jill and all her other troubles. Her heart was too busy soaring because Jerry Alder had thought enough of her to rescue her from Señor Croff's attentions. This—this was a moment to be remembered. . . .

But it was a moment all too brief, for as they skirted the trees that bordered the hacienda, Tio Santos' furious voice jerked Juana's eyes open and brought Jerry to a halt.

"You 'ave no business dancing weeth my leetle girl!" Santos snarled, his hand significantly near his hip pocket where he carried a sheath knife. "You do not know her, Americano! I 'ave never introduce' you. You mus' leave her alone!" His eyes were nasty.

"I saw she didn't want to dance with Croff, an' I cut in to stop it!" Jerry said in the soft, decisive voice which Juana had dreamed he'd have. "Croff's no good, especially where women are concerned."

"I alone am judge of what Juana does!" Santos snapped. "Keep your hands from her, Americano! Or else—"

He tapped his knife, and with free hand jerked Juana away from Jerry Alder. Then he turned to Juana. "You will come home!" he said. "You will come home at once!"

CHAPTER TWO

Runaway Heart

THEY went through the night, Juana and Santos, with Santos' fingers like the jaws of a steel trap around Juana's slender wrist. The little bag of prize money he'd snatched from her and thrust deep in one of his pockets. He didn't say a thing until they were inside the house. After he'd lighted a lamp he turned furiously upon her.

"You little fool," he spat, "you could see that the Señor Croff likes you a very great deal! Your hair has fascinated him. And now you have spoiled things! I could see the Señor Croff's face turn red with rage!"

"I—I cannot bear the thought of Señor Croff's arms around me," Juana whimpered, fear such as she'd never before felt rousing at the vindictive light in Santos' eyes. "I—It was much nicer to dance with the Americano."

Santos spat with contempt, "He is a nobody—only a poor spinner of the rope! But Señor Croff is rich and might make you his wife."

"I—I do not want to be his wife."

Santos' voice lifted to fury. "I am your guardian, and I know what is best! I told you to please Señor Croff, but you made him angry. You disobeyed me. I must punish you because I am your guardian."

But it wasn't as her guardian that he would beat her, Juana thought with a sick feeling in her stomach. Santos' fiendish nature was roused, and he'd punish her for the pure pleasure it gave him. The bruises on her arms tingled, and fear battered like tiny points of frost along her spine. There'd be more bruises on her before Santos was done tonight!

"I must punish you!" the man repeated, swinging his arm high. The fat palm was poised to swing down across Juana's soft cheek. . . .

Then there was the clatter of hoofs outside. Someone called, "Ho, within there! Anybody home?"

Santos' arm stiffened as if it had suddenly turned to stone. His mouth gaped with surprise. And Juana recognized those tones, too. Señor Croff!

Thankful to be spared punishment, she fled into the other room and dropped on the bed, her heart thumping heavily. What could Señor Croff want? Santos knew him only casually, and there wasn't a reason in the world for him to be here. Unless. . . .

Her heart turned sick. She crept to the door and listened to the voices.

". . . this little Juana is a high-spirited filly, and she made me very angry tonight!" Señor Croff was saying. "But I will forgive her, for I have noticed her and I approve of her. When first you came here, Santos, I saw her, and I have thought much about her. She has—ah, the longest and most beautiful hair in the world! Tonight I saw it to its full length, and it made me decide on something I had thought about. You are her guardian, Santos?

"That is true, señor." Santos' voice carried a tang of humility as he sought so hard to please Señor Croff. "The mayor of Santa Rita down in Mexico made me her guardian when a great flood carried her parents away. Of what use can I be to you, señor?"

Señor Croff said, in a dreamy voice which to Juana was frightening, "I like long hair, and I like Juana. My house has been empty of a wife for sometime now, Santos, and I wish for a woman to fill it."

"And you would like for my little Juana?" Santos broke in eagerly. Gone was the tang of humility now. Suddenly he became Santos, who would bargain a girl's happiness for gold. And fear of a different sort than when Santos' palm had been upraised laid hold of Juana.

"That is what I intend, Santos. I would marry Juana."

Juana, leaning against the door, felt her knees turn so weak that she had to hang to the wall to keep upright. The wife of that mad-eyed man who already had married four women!

"Of course, Señor Croff, you know the custom of our country," Santos was saying. "It is usual for the husband-to-be to make a settlement upon the parents or the guardian of the young lady. And my Juana is very beautiful—truly a wife to be proud of! There are many men would marry her. But if the señor is willing to make a large enough settlement—?"

"There will be no haggling over a settlement." Croff returned shortly. "I am not a stingy man, Santos. I will make you such a large settlement that you may go back to Mexico and spend the rest of your days gambling and drinking!"

JUANA didn't want to hear any more. She reeled back to the bed and collapsed upon it. The wife of Señor Croff—no, never! Especially when she loved another, a tow-headed man with blue, blue eyes that made her heart batter against her ribs and her breath come as quickly as if she'd been running. . . .

Then suddenly she was determined. Her fingers trembling, she slipped out of her mother's dress and into the blouse and skirt which were her everyday apparel. The dress, with the slippers and a few trinkets, she thrust into a small canvas sack. Then she crept to the window in the rear of the room and softly opened it.

The window was a very little window, but then Juana was a very little and slender girl, and she wriggled through it easily. The cool night air chilled her and the blackness on the desert dismayed her, but determinedly she struck out in the direction of the little town along the river where there were some *Mejicanos* who might help her out of the country.

She wasn't, however, acquainted with the desert, and before she'd gone a mile she found herself confused as to directions. She attempted to locate the north star then, to direct herself, but there were clouds over the sky and no starlight seeped through. Soon a sharp wind cut her cheek, and then she knew those clouds presaged a storm.

"Oh, *Madre de dios!*" she whispered. "Help me to reach the *Mejicanos* before the storm comes up!"

She didn't know in what direction she had come, or in what direction she was going. She seemed to be in a well of blackness that boomed to the sound of rising wind. Alkali and grit whipped into Juana's nose and made her sneeze. More wind drove alkali into her eyes until she had to rub her hands across them to keep them open. Not that it mattered—she couldn't see anything, except vague, unreal shadows that didn't help her. All she could do was stumble forward, keeping in as nearly a straight line as possible.

But before the wind had lifted to the terrific wail which meant the desert storm was in full fury, she realized she was hopelessly lost. She braced herself against the cold thrust and tried to still the wild beating of her heart. Stories of other people who had been lost in storms such as this—the wife of Señor Croff, for instance, whom he had driven out—came back to terrify her. It was difficult enough for the strongest men to live in wind and dust like this. What chance had she, a slender little girl who couldn't even hold herself erect against the wind?

"Oh, madre *mia,*" she thought, "I am doomed. Oh, Jerr-ee. . . ."

Jerry, tall and blue-eyed, roused in her imagination. She seemed to see him plainly, as if he stood before her in broad daylight—the half-smile on his lips, the sunshine a-gleam on his bright hair, and his tender look speeding her heart.

"Oh, Jerr-ee. I love you. . . .!"

Then something stirred and lumbered close to Juana. She thought at once of some strange monster of the storm, half-man, half-horse, and involuntarily she recoiled. Then the upper part of the monster jerked down to her and lifted her out of the drifting alkali as easily as if she weighed no more than a feather. But the monster was warm, of flesh and blood, and Juana saw it was a tall man on a horse.

"Hang onto me!" the man called above the wail of the wind, "There's a shack about a quarter of a mile from here where we can ride the storm out!"

"Oh, thank you, señor," Juana said, knowing he couldn't hear her, but still remembering the politeness her mother had taught her. "Eet ees nice of you to rescue me. . . ."

Alkali stung her eyes shut. She held them closed until after many minutes, the man dropped her from the horse and led her into darkness that was deeper than ever. But there was no wind here, though it screamed loudly close by.

Juana heard the click of a match lighted by a thumb nail and she opened her eyes to find herself in a room. The tall man was lighting a lamp. Yellow flame gleamed on his hatless, light hair and the lashes that were like pale scars across his face. Jerry Alder!

He'd come out of the night to rescue her—just as he had come unexpectedly to take her from the arms of Croff!

FOR a minute—perhaps because her heart was behaving so queerly and her breath coming in that curious manner—Juana was a little embarrassed. Then, all of a sudden, it seemed right that she should be standing here beside him, just as it had seemed to her when they were dancing that they'd danced together all their lives.

(Continued on page 94)

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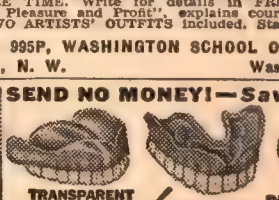

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(Continued from page 93)

"Eet ees nice of you to rescue me." Juana said again, with a flash of very white teeth between lips as red as the berries the Indians used for their crimson dye, "and I thank you for dancing with me tonight, Señor Jerr-ee!"

She called him "Jerr-ee" without being conscious of the fact that this was the first time she'd spoken to him. And neither of them thought much about it when Jerry, in turn, didn't address her formally.

"Glad to help you, Juana. I saw you didn't want to dance with him, so—he shrugged his broad shoulders, smiling.

Juana giggled, remembering. "The Señor Croff was very anrgy. He deed not like eet—"

She forgot that she was a runaway from Croff and Santos. She forgot everything except that she was here alone with Jerry Alder whom she loved. Jerry ducked out of the room to take care of his horse, but he was gone only a few moments. He returned, slapping dust from his shirt.

"The wind'll go down in a couple of hours," he said cheerfully. "By dawn this storm'll be done for, I reckon. I—How-come you happened to be out in it?"

"I—I 'ave run away from my uncle, Tio Santos, who is cruel—"

"Ran away, eh?" said Jerry, his bright blue look disturbing her. "You picked a bad time to do it, Juana. Didn't you know a storm was comin' up? An' when a storm kicks up in this country, folks hike for cover."

"But you were out in it, Jerr-ee."

"Sure!" He grinned, seemingly with embarrassment—which made him doubly attractive. "I was sore as a wet hen when Santos took you away from me. But—well, he's your guardian. I couldn't do much. Then I saw Croff get his horse an' light out. When Croff moves, I'll follow.

Anythin' that crook does is my business. I waited around your place, then sneaked up to hear what was goin' on. They'd just found out you were gone. The storm was comin' up, an' I headed into it. You see, I've punched cattle along here, an' a human will drift the same as a cow-critter when lost in the wind. I've hunted new calves in the wind, so I hunted you the same way, pretty sure I'd find you before long!"

Juana's heart caught and flopped over, and she felt like crying. Perhaps—perhaps Jerry Alder loved her! Anyway, he'd rescued her.

"Oh, madre!" she whispered, "Make it so. Make him love me, as I love him. Eef you cannot do that, make heem love me even a leetle bit!"

And then, maybe because she'd always been so very respectful when she used the name of the mother—but more probably because there was a light in her eyes no man could resist, and her lips were expectantly parted—Jerry Alder kissed her!

CHAPTER THREE

Love Turns Round

HIS arms encircled her like steel cables, and Juana gave a little gasp for breath before his lips closed on hers. And then she didn't care whether she breathed or not. All she wanted to do, forever, was lie there in his arms, with his lips warm against hers, his love flowing to her in a way she could almost feel.

Her heart drummed in her ears, but there was no other sound; there was no time, no other happening save the ecstasy of this moment of love. The wail of the storm outside was of another world, as were Croff and Santos and all the evil things which had made Juana's heart sore. But now her heart would never be sore again—not when Jerry Alder kissed her like this!

It was a long, long kiss filled with tenderness. When it was ended Jerry held her close against him, gently stroking her long hair which the wind had tangled into a cloud of wild, dark glory about her head and shoulders.

"Juana!" he said slowly, as if testing the music of the name, "your hair—it's beautiful! I noticed it when you first came into the country. I—I wanted so to meet you, but Santos told me to stay away. I heard he intended you to marry some rich man. An' me—I'm only a poor rider. So I kept myself from thinking of you."

So that was why his look had always been so impersonal!

"I—I know now Santos is not a good guardian, an' I know you don't care for Croff. So I'm goin' to let myself feel what I guess I've kept hidden from even myself all along. I love you!"

His arms tightened possessively and Juana sighed with happiness. She lay close against him, the thunder of his heart in her ears, the warmth of his body beneath his shirt against her cheek. To lie here in his arms forever—that would be happiness indeed. Much happiness for a little Spanish girl who hadn't had much of it during the last few months.

But there was Jill. . . .

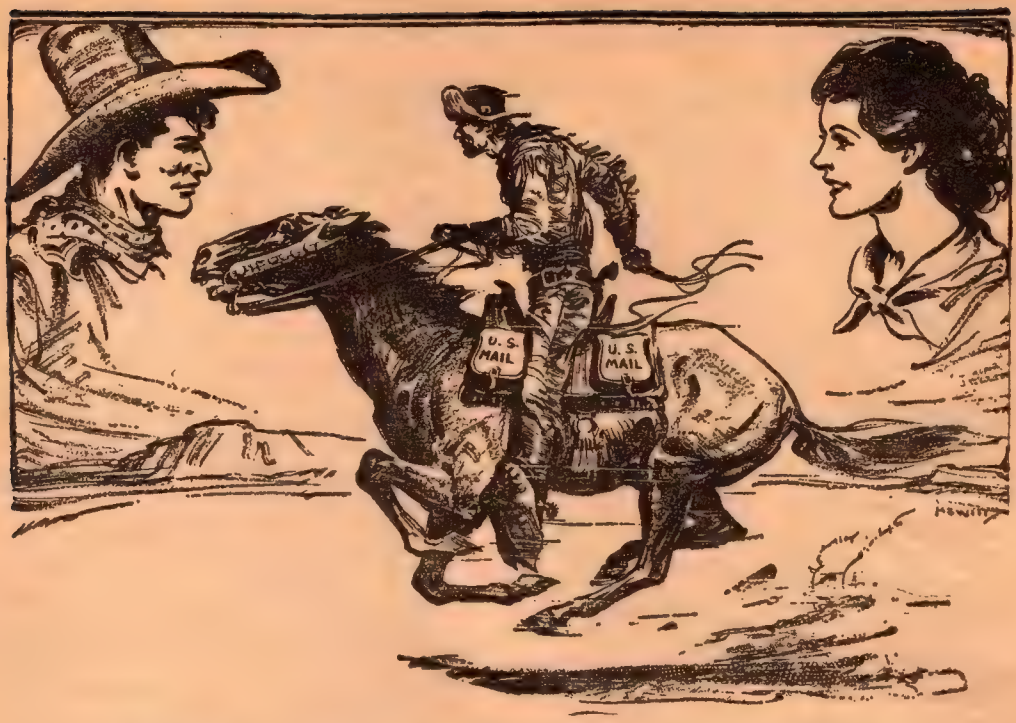
Juana stirred and a faint dissatisfaction roused within her. What about this blonde Americano girl whom Jerry seemed to know so well? She hesitated, then asked, "Jerr-ee, you weel not be angry weeth me eef I ask you one question?"

"I couldn't be angry with you for any reason, Juana!"

"Eet ees perhaps silly, but—thees Jeel, you love her, no?"

Jerry Alder laughed—a big, hearty laugh that was so reassuring that Juana felt tears of relief come to her eyes, even before Jerry's words proved what his

(Continued on page 100)



THE PONY EXPRESS

THE snow is melting in the highlands, the ice in the rivers is breaking up, and the Pony Express rider thunders on his way. His saddlebags are teeming with letters—messages of friendship and cheer to fill the lonely hours of the romantic Spring evenings that lie ahead.

She Likes the North Woods

Dear Editor:

Won't you please publish my letter in your column? I like *Rangeland Romances* and I would like to get acquainted with others who read it.

I am twenty years old. I like to write and read letters. I like all out door sports, especially horseback riding, fishing and swimming.

I have traveled through several states, but so far I like Colorado and the northern woods in Wisconsin the best. Some day I expect to travel through all of the states.

So, won't some one please write to me? I'd try to make my letters interesting and I'll answer anyone who writes.

As far as my personal description is concerned, I'll send a snapshot of myself to those who write, so you can judge for yourself.

DOROTHY KRAMER
6118 Gunnison St.,
Chicago, Ill.

A Friendly Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

I'm a continual reader of the *Rangeland Romances*. I read lots of books and like stories of the far countries. I'm sending a plea far and wide for pen pals. Come on, you pals, and I'll round-up all the news I know about cowboys and the range life.

I'm a friendly cowgirl. I'm 5 ft. 6 in. tall. I have dark blue eyes and am a light brunette. I weigh 115 lbs., am seventeen years old. I have horses and cows of my own and I've ridden the range a lot.

Be sure to write and I'll tell you about the range of Idaho.

A cowgirl friend,
MISS L. E. JOHNSON
Clayton, Idaho

Southwestern Girls Preferred

Dear Editor:

Have read your magazine since August, 1939, and like all the stories, especially the ones in the February issue by Ruby la Verte Thomson and Nevada Montaine. In short, I like Popular Publication magazines.

What I want, if possible, is a few sincere pen pals—girls only. So please print an ad to that effect as soon as space and time permit.

I am 30 years, 5 ft. 8 in. in height, weigh 156 lb., have dark blond hair and brown eyes. I want lady friends in Southwestern U. S. A. between the ages of 22 and 28. Will exchange snapshots, and will write about anything. Have been in 21 states, and came across the Atlantic

in 1928, so I have seen quite a little of this world. My hobbies are many, and I will tell you all that you may want to know.

HENRY TIEMANN
P. O. Box 464
Sidney, Nebr.

Write, Pals . . . That Is All

Dear Editor:

Calling all pals! Calling all pals! Come to the aid of a twenty-year-old Kansas miss whose hobby is collecting salt and pepper shakers. She would like to have sets and letters from every state in the Union. She is five feet one inch tall, weighs 102 pounds, has dark hair and dark eyes, and is not married. She thinks it is a great life, full of thrills and excitement, quite worth the effort of living it. Write to her at once. That is all.

DOROTHY F. PORTER
Box 131
Kirwin, Kansas

He'll Come to See You

Dear Editor:

During the first week of April I am planning on starting a two year trip through the United States, hitting every state. I would like to hear from many, many men and women who will write me in detail about the sights that they have nearby that would be worth visiting. I will stop and see, if only for a moment, all those who write me such a letter, if I get close to your home. I am taking a movie camera along and will "shoot" several hundred feet of scenes. I am 28 years old, single, with dark brown hair and eyes, and am considered good looking. I will enjoy receiving snapshots but can't promise to send one to all who send me theirs.

RAYMOND E. BIDLACK
Oakwood, Ohio

You Can Help Cheer Her

Dear Editor:

I am a sad, broken-hearted mother. I lost my daughter, and am left with four small grandchildren to raise. And a raft of hospital and doctors' bills, which I am trying to pay by making quilts, hand-quilted pillows, hook and braided rugs and fancy quilting. I would like so much to hear from any one interested in my work.

I was in the hospital for a month after my daughter's death. I was very ill, and was confined to my bed and house all summer. I am trying to take my daughter's place with her little children. I am confined at home all the time.

Letters help to cheer and pass some of the long lonely hour.

I have stamps, post marks, and other things for those who collect.

MRS. G. TRAVIS BURRIS
Stanfield, N. C.
R. No. 1, Box 18

FRANK O'NIEL is a professional fighter who has traveled all over the eastern part of the United States. Frank, 24, weighs 160 and is 5 ft. 11 in. tall. He is particularly anxious to establish contact with pen pals (ladies) from the West.—P. O. Box 2091, Pensacola, Florida.

CAROL SMYTH says she's a southerner "who carries out southern hospitality." Definitely a blonde, and slender, Carol is 19. She writes poetry and collects snaps. She likes dancing, singing, painting and horseback riding. She wishes to hear from all boys and girls between 19 and 29.—2607 Orleans St., Baltimore, Md.

GUY TYLER lives in the land of the coyotes and longhorn cacti, and is looking for pen pals from every nook and corner of the world. "I can tell many tales of this western country," says Guy. "So from Alaska to Sumatra, let's hear from you."—Circle Back, Texas.

ROSE and JUSTINE CARTER are two lonely orphaned sisters. Rose is 5 ft. 4 in. tall, with black, wavy hair, sparkling brown eyes, a fair complexion. She weighs 150 lbs. and is 21. Justine is just as nice, too. Both promise long and interesting letters.—Mrs. J. M. Shelton, 907 N. Center St., Joliet, Ill.

CHARLES SISSON has been a reader of Rangeland Romances for a long time, and it just popped into his head that perhaps a lot of folks about his own age (48) would like to write and swap stories.—521 N. 20th St., Columbus, Ohio.

JACK BAUGHN drives a truck over the sunny roads of California. Jack is 5 ft. 11 in. tall, weighs 160 pounds and is 26. All who write him are certain of lengthy, interesting letters.—Box C, Nevada City, Calif.

ROBERT FERGUSON and Ed Fearey, of the Royal Canadian Navy, get pretty lonesome on their boats and would like to receive a few letters. Bob is 19, with dark hair and blue eyes. Ed is tall, blond and weighs 160. The lads tell us that, due to the war, they won't be able to describe what they are doing now. But they'll be able to write about what happened before the war began.—H. M. C. Stadacona, Fleet Mail Office, Mess 21, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

DONALDA SCARLING cracks into the Pony Express after her third try and tells us she's 18, with brown hair, blue eyes and is 5 ft. 7 in. tall. Donalda plays the Spanish guitar, sings and yodels. She owns a collection of 500 cowboy songs.—Clifton R. R. No. 1, King's County, N. B., Canada.

LOUISE DUNCKEL and Naomi Wilson want to exchange snaps and letters with folks all over the world. Louise is called "Squeezie" and Naomi "Nancy." Both love all kinds of sports.—Louise Dunckel, R. D. No. 2, Oxford, N. Y.; Naomi Wilson, Box 537, Oxford, N. Y.

ROSEMARY PRIMIANI's lovely writing asks if there is a chance for a "steno" to crash the gates. Rosemary is 19 and weighs 125 lbs. She is of Swiss-Italian ancestry.—4422 Price St., Hollywood, Calif.

DESMOND GATES would like especially to correspond with amateur photographers, being one himself. Des says he's pretty lonely right now, and to those sending the first 25 letters he will ship a picture of himself. Des is 20.—6972 Dominique St., Montreal, Canada.

LORENE THOMAS and Marilyn Smith desire letters from young men. Lorene is a brunette, with big brown eyes and a "beautiful shape." Marilyn is blonde, with blue eyes.—Box 1, Hilton Drive, Phoenix, Ariz.

EVERETT LYDAMORE likes good music, photography, swimming, dancing and receiving and writing letters. Everett, 5 ft., 6 in. tall, doesn't drink or smoke. He would like to hear from girls between 23 and 39. —Route 4, Wolf Lake, Muskegon, Mich.

GAIL COOPER is a real Texas cowboy. He says it's a long way to the nearest neighbor and time lies heavily on his hands. He invites boys and girls from all over the nation to sit and yarn a while.—Brady, Texas.

FRANCIS FOURNIER has worked in hotels and restaurants all his life and knows the business inside out. Now, at 32, he is looking for a partner to help him start a little feed place. Those interested can contact Francis at 119 E. Main St., Rockville, Conn.

SARA SIPE expresses the hope that somewhere on our range are pen pals who will write to a lonely girl away from home. Sara, working in a city, wants to hear from cowboys or hillbillies. She will answer all letters.—543 N. Monroe St., Butler, Penn.

DAVE STEGALL is 20, has blue eyes, dark-red curly hair and weighs 155 lbs. All sports go with Dave, but he prefers basketball. He hopes the folks will sling a little ink down his way.—Route 2, Box 412, Monroe, N. C.

NEVA WILLIAMS wants to hear from men between the ages of 20 and 30. Neva has traveled the West. She's a brunette, 5 ft., 3 in. tall. Western books and poems are her hobbies.—212 E. Wood St., Aberdeen, Wash.

CORRINE GALLUP wonders if there is a chance for her to get onto the Pony Express. Sure thing! Corrine is 17 and weighs 117 lbs. She says she's considered good-looking by her friends. Letters from cowboys are sought particularly by this lass.—Cedar Point, Ill.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

LENGTHY, the sad-faced cook of the Lazy K, was master of a lot of handy camp cookery knowledge, aside from the construction and use of fireless cookers. And he was willing to pass on advice, though it would nearly always be concluded with, "That's the way of it, ma'am, but I don't s'pose you'll ever be able to do it right."

Contrary to his pessimism, I found the instructions easy, requiring little practice to attain excellent results.

"Build your cookfire on a little bit higher spot than you're standin'," he once advised. "Then you won't have to wear out your back stoopin' so much. A flat-topped boulder is good—then you can build kind of a firebox of small rocks, to rest your pot rack on. If you hafta make your fire on the level ground, clear a space about four-five feet each way, then dig a little trench, a foot or so long and 'bout ten inches deep. Fire built in this pit won't be blown about by the wind. You get more heat, and there ain't so much danger of it spreading. You can keep a flaming fire at one end for quick boiling, and hot coals at the other for broiling or slow cooking."

It was from Lengthy that I obtained my pet recipe for corn pone. Try it the next time you cook out-of-doors. Mix three cups of yellow cornmeal, one cup of white flour, one teaspoon of salt, eight level teaspoons of baking powder and two tablespoons of sugar.

Into the dry ingredients, work half a cup of drippings from beef, or bacon, salt pork or ham fat. Then stir in slowly, to avoid lumps, about four cups of cold water. The dough should be just thick enough to drop from a spoon. Pour this into a frying pan to half-an-inch depth and hold over the fire until it bakes like a hot cake, and holes appear in the upper surface. Then prop the pan against a log or stone, so the pone will catch the heat until the upper surface is cooked. The result will be crisp, and so tasty you won't be able to eat enough to satisfy you. Sometimes Lengthy dropped this batter by spoonsful on the top of a hot, flat rock.

The sure way to win favor from him was to carry a few cabbages along when visiting his camp. Lengthy would nibble the crisp leaves with as much delight as a rabbit. And he would always make a most delicious concoction he called, "Heavenly Cabbage." It's a good dish, being a meal in itself.

Wash and chop a large head of cabbage very fine. Cut into small pieces a

pound-and-a-half of beef, or two cans of roast beef. Put these into a deep kettle with one tablespoon of hot lard. Fry until brown. To this, add twelve medium-size sausages, an onion chopped or sliced fine, and the cabbage. Season to your taste with salt, black pepper and cayenne. Stir the mixture frequently, allowing it to cook slowly. Add a small amount of water occasionally if it gets too thick, or seems inclined to burn. When the cabbage mixture is thoroughly done, stir into it a cream sauce made as follows: Mix two tablespoons of flour with a small amount of cold water, stirring in slowly, one pint of milk, or half evaporated milk and half water, bringing to boil over slow fire. This may be eaten with crackers, toast or crusty biscuit.

Before we turn away from Lengthy's camp cookery, I want to tell you about his "Vegetable Stew."

Fry a quarter-of-a-pound of salt pork until light brown. Remove from the fire and add one cup of finely cut onions, one cup of diced carrots, one cup of diced white potatoes and one cup of green lima beans (canned or fresh). Cook for one-half hour with enough water to cover. Then add a cup of canned, or cooked, peas and one can of tomato soup, seasoning to your own taste.

A number of people seem to be interested in fish recipes and since many a summer camp will be well supplied with the results of "rod and fly," the next issue will include the favored dishes of the Forest Ranger, as well as one obtained from an old prospector.

And I'm not forgetting the young lady, whose sweetheart likes meat pies. There will be a recipe for her to practice before she visits his cow camp in the Rockies. There she can surprise him with a dish so tempting I guarantee it will spur any young cowboy to pop the question to the pretty cook.

—Myrtle Juliette Corey

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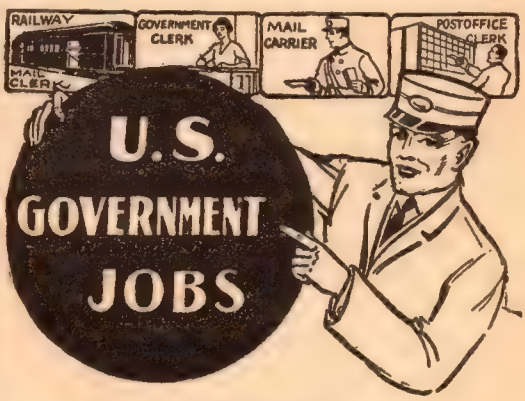

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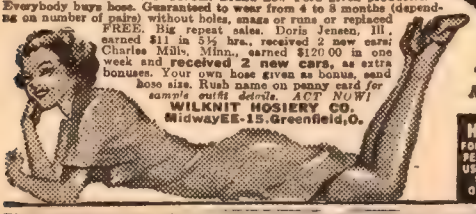

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(Continued from page 95)

laugh had implied. He spoke quickly.

"Jill? She's a nice kid. You ought to meet her some time!"

Then he added, kissing her almost roughly, "But I love Juana!" Juana couldn't have resisted him if she had tried —as if she should want to keep her lips from his kisses! He kissed her until she was breathless, until her heart seemed to want to burst for love of him, and a happiness such as she'd never known— never in all her life—swept over her to fill her with ecstatic glory.

When he released her and she became conscious of her surroundings, she noticed that the rush of the storm had diminished. To her questioning look, Jerry said, "I reckon it's over with."

Then, noting her dusty canvas bag, he asked, "What's that?"

"Eet ees the dress of my mother. Eet was to be worn when I am married, but last night Santos forced me to wear eet. I weel not wear eet again until I am married!"

Jerry kissed her again, and this time Juana had to protest for she was feeling bruised all over. So he loosed her, but held her with one arm while with his free hand he found a bit of cord which he expertly formed into a loop.

Juana watched curiously. Jerry made a miniature lariat, which he swung idly. "Just a habit," he said, smiling at her. "I've done a lot of rope-spinning in rodeos, an' I reckon I make lass' ropes an' spin them automatically."

"I like to watch thees little loop go whirling around," Juana returned, intent upon the small, flying circle of cord. "Eet ees nice. Do eet some more, Jerr-ee!" She added, "Some day I weel make you a lariat from the tail of a horse. A good lariat. My mother taught me to make thees hair ropes, and I 'ave made many for my father to sell. But I weel make you

such a good one as has never been made before."

"An' I'll be so proud of it, Juana, that I'll carry it around with a sign on it: 'To Jerry, with love from Juana'!"

They both laughed at the absurdity of the thought. So the few hours before dawn passed—too quickly to Juana. They didn't say much; there didn't seem much to say. They were content with each other, and Juana thought that the new dawn would be the most glorious one she'd ever looked upon.

THE new dawn. . . . But when they forced away the sand which had drifted against the door of the hut and swung it open, there stood Santos and Señor Croff. Santos' stubby fist held a knife, and Croff's talon fingers gripped a gun.

"So she ran away, and I find her here with another man!" Croff snapped to Santos. "You'll see that doesn't happen again, Santos!"

"Señor Croff, eet weel not!" Santos assured him.

The blued muzzle of Croff's weapon aimed at Jerry, and a terrible fear for her sweetheart roused in Juana. But she felt a thrill of pride, too, at the way he stood so straight and tall and unafraid of the death menacing him.

"What's on your mind, Croff?" he demanded coolly.

"Just this, Alder: I'll not have you around Juana. The next time I find you with her, I'll kill you!"

It wasn't an idle warning, or a threat made by a man in the heat of anger. Croff meant it. He'd kill as suddenly as a diamondback rattler striking. And kill as coldly, too.

"What you aimin' to do with her?" Jerry demanded, jerking his head towards Juana.

"I've got plans for her, Alder. I'm marrying her, if that's of interest to you. Now climb onto your horse and get out, if you want to keep healthy!"

Then when he hesitated, Juana, breaking away from Santos' detaining hand, ran to him and put her arm in his. She was shaking hard, but the firm pressure of his body calmed her.

"Please, Jerr-ee!" she pleaded. "Ride away at once. He—he mus' not keel you—"

"An' I don't aim to have him marry you, either!" He dipped his head down and before Santos, striding forward angrily, could tear her away, he whispered in her ear, "I'll come for you, Juana, an' I'll come soon! I love you!"

Santos jerked her away and Croff's gun forced Jerry back to his horse, which he'd tied last night in a lean-to attached to the hut. Slowly, Jerry mounted and turned away. But he didn't take his bright, blue look from Juana, and as he rode off he raised his hand in a salute and a promise. To Juana it said, "Remember what I said. I'll come for you!"

"Oh, Jerr-ee!" Juana whispered, "I weel be counting the hours!"

Santos' cruel grip roused her to the presence of the two men. Croff was watching her with a look so like the eagerness of some bird of prey! The big fear-lump which had gone from her throat returned to Juana, only it wasn't so choking and unbearable. It wouldn't be long before Jerry took her away from Groff and Santos!

"See that she does not escape again, Santos," Groff was saying, "the wedding will be five days from today. At that time she will come to my hacienda, and I shall make the marriage settlement upon you."

"Si, Señor Croff!" Santos nodded eagerly, "Eet shall be so!"

"And see that all foolishness about any Americano is out of her head!" Croff added harshly. "I do not care to marry a wildcat who will fight me all the time! A little spirit is good, yes—but Juana has

too much. Take it out of her—or else!"

Back at the hut, Santos shoved Juana into the room from which she had escaped the night before. He didn't beat her, strangely enough, and for that she was thankful without wondering at his unusual leniency.

"You will not escape again! The Señor Croff was angry when we found you gone last night. We rode all night in the storm looking for you. Then when the wind went down we began to search all the shacks where you might have gone, for we knew you could not work into the wind, and we found you. But you will not escape again!"

Santos put bars over the window of the shack. Then he braced the door between the two rooms, and Juana was indeed in a prison. But she didn't care. Jerry Alder would come for her. Of course Jerry would come!

But the day passed. And another day. Then another—and no Jerry.

THE lump in Juana's throat became larger, and doubt stirred. She was silly to doubt Jerry even a little, of course, but—why didn't he come to rescue her?

"Jerr-ee!" she cried sometimes in the evenings, when she looked through the bars to the lonely desert. "You mus' come soon. Please. . . .!"

But no motter how hard she stared, no horseman materialized out of the loneliness, nor did Jerry's whisper at the window awaken her in the night, as she'd thought it would. And on the evening of the fourth day, while she peered out and hoped hard—so hard! Santos told her that on the morrow she would be married.

"But tonight there is a fiesta at the hacienda of Señor Gordon, whose rancho is to the east of us," he added. "I shall take you there, that you may enjoy yourself!"

Juana's heart leaped. Jerry's ranch was to the east, and perhaps he might be at the fiesta! Her heart pounding heavily, she combed her long hair, bound it up in a huge knot at the back of her neck, and ran a crimson ribbon through it. Of course, she assured herself, Jerry had some reason for not coming! But tonight she'd see him. . . . Perhaps he would take her from Santos, and together they'd ride some place where Santos and Croff would never find them.

Santos kept a firm grip on her arm after they dismounted at the fiesta. *Mejicanos* were dancing wildly, as on the night of Croff's fiesta, and the guitars played the same music as that night when Jerry Alder had come out of nowhere to dance with her, to hold her tight, to make sure she loved him. . . .

"Come this way," Santos said urgently. "We may see something to interest you."

Wonderingly, Juana followed him without protest. They halted in the shadows of trees, where they could overlook the fiesta. Santos seemed to be looking very intently for someone, but Juana scarcely marveled at that because she, too, was looking for somebody just as intently.

Suddenly Santos said, "There, over in the shadows?"

Juana looked, and heat and cold swept over her by turns. For Jerry Alder was standing in a dark niche where two adobe walls angled together. . . . Jerry and someone else. A tall, blonde person—

"Jeel!" Juana gasped.

The lump was in her throat again, and it grew horribly large when Jerry put his arm around Jill, tightened it possessively—and then kissed her.

It wasn't any casual kiss. It had meaning, as anyone could have seen. Even Juana, not wanting to believe what her eyes saw, was forced to acknowledge that a man didn't kiss a woman like that unless it had some significance.

"Jerr-ee!" she moaned. "Oh, Jerr-ee!"

She turned away, not seeing anything because of the tears in her eyes. Santos followed her back to the horses, and made no protest when she mounted and signified that she wanted to return to the shack.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wedding Bells of Sorrow

BACK in the shack, Juana threw herself on the bed and for once let herself cry all she wanted to. No ghosts of mothers and fathers and ancestors stood by to reprove her for thus showing her feelings, for the pride she'd inherited from them couldn't begin to hold back this outburst of sorrow.

It was only when there were no more tears left that she calmed herself. And, once getting hold of herself, she became very, very calm. Strangely, the lump in her throat was gone. There was no sorrow in her. But where her heart had been was only an empty, aching space that she knew, throughout the years to come, would always remain empty and aching.

"Jerr-ee," she cried aloud, "Jerr-ee—and Jeel. I—I hope she weel be a good sweetheart to you!"

Pure bravado made her say that, but she wasn't sorry she said it. She didn't hate Jerry half so much as she hated herself for loving him. She should have known better than to trust an Americano, of course. Jerry Alder, with his slick tongue that spoke words of love—false words, which for a little while had given her a happiness she'd never forget. . . .

"Jerr-ee!"

She said the name slowly, and then was sure that she'd said it for the last time aloud. She might think it, but never, never would her lips betray her thoughts. She was quite dry-eyed now, and deter-

(Continued on page 104)

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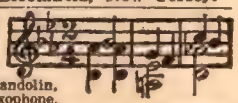

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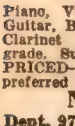

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(Continued from page 103)

mined on what she was going to do. She walked to the door and threw it open. Santos, hunched in a chair under the lamp, stirred.

"Tio Santos, I—I am ready to marry Señor Croff. I will not be silly about it any longer!"

Santos grunted. "It is well. Señor Croff is rich and will make you a good husband. This Señor Alder—it was good that you saw him tonight. He did not love you. If he told you he loved you, he lied!"

"He lied!" Juana agreed emptily. A sudden suspicion struck her, and she demanded, "You knew he and his sweetheart were to be there together tonight, and you took me there to see them. Is that true?"

"It is!" Santos admitted. "I wished you to see what kind of a man you loved. You are but a little girl, Juana, and likely to be fooled by the smooth tongues of these Americanos. It is well that you have a guardian like Santos to look out for you."

Juana didn't say anything. She remembered now Señor Croff's warning to Santos to take the foolishness about the Americano out of her head. Clever Santos! He'd taken it out of her head, all right!

"Santos, you win!" she said wearily. "You shall have your settlement, and I will marry Señor Croff—yes, and I shall make him a good wife!"

But that might be difficult, she thought—kissing those repulsive lips when her thoughts were of Jerry Alder's warm mouth against her, his strong arms crushing her.

"I shall put on the wedding dress of my mother, and I shall be the bride of Señor Croff!" It seemed like another person saying that. A slim, black-haired girl whose heart had been torn from her and thrown to the desert wind.

AND it was the slim black-haired girl who hadn't any heart, only a big, aching place where her heart should have been, who on the morrow sat at a table near Señor Croff, Santos and a couple of Croff's men. The place was a room in Croff's hacienda—a vast, sprawling castle of adobe, in which it was whispered there was a dungeon room for the punishment of those who displeased Señor Croff. Juana thought of that now as she listened to the talk of the men, and the bustle of preparation out in the patio where they were making ready for the wedding.

She shuddered a little.

"In a few hours more you'll be my wife!" Croff said, his tongue running along his lips with that anticipatory gesture, "You're very beautiful, Juana. Such long, beautiful hair. . . ."

"I thank you for the compliment, señor," Juana returned, avoiding his eyes. "Eet ees nice of you to say that!"

"And now, these matter of a settlement!" Santos urgently cut in.

Croff turned his eyes from Juana, and she was thankful. He slapped his hands sharply and a servant appeared, bearing a heavy leather bag that clinked in a manner to brighten Santos' eyes.

"It's a large settlement," Croff said, lighting a long cigar. "But I suppose Juana is worth it! Such a beautiful little girl, with such beautiful long hair!"

"She ees indeed worth eet!" Santos cried. "She ees a prize well worth your generous settlement, señor. She weel make you a good wife—the best there ees to be had!"

He fondled the leather sack, shifting it to make the contents clink, and smiling with his eyes half-closed so the greed in them wouldn't show. But the greed was there, Juana knew, and she shuddered.

She was thankful when Croff said, "You shall go to your room now, Juana, and prepare for the wedding." And he added, his tongue running along his lips in that gesture which made Juana a little sick, "in another few hours you will be my wife, Juana!"

"Y-yes, Señor Croff!"

"And as Santos promises, you will be a good wife?"

"I—I weel be a very good wife to you, señor."

She could feel his eyes follow her as she went out into a hallway and she was glad when a wall shut her from sight. Wearily, she went out into the patio. The heavy throb within her couldn't be her heart, for she had none. . . .

A fat *Mejicano* woman bustled up, to ask respectfully, "Will the señorita come to her room and put on her wedding dress?"

Juana shook her head, saying, "I will be along soon. I wish to look at the sky for a moment, and the bushes here in the patio."

She'd never look again at the sky with the same freedom as now, she thought. Something within her whispered over and over: "Soon you'll be Señor Croff's wife."

Señor Croff's wife—well, why not? She'd make him a good wife. He was rich; he would give her everything. Of course she'd be a good wife to him!

And then something stirred in the bushes which bordered the fountain in the center of the patio.

Juana, turning in alarm, saw a man slip out of hiding and skulk forward—a tall man with pale brows and blue, blue eyes that set her heart to thundering and made her forget all about Señor Croff.

"Jerr-ee!" she faltered. "What—what are you doing here?"

There was a grimness about his jaws which thrilled her, and he clipped his voice so decisively that every low-spoken word was plain.

"I went down to your place this mornin', an' found you gone. I figured you'd been kept prisoner an' brought

here. I've got a couple of horses cached outside—I've been sneakin' around this buildin' to find you—an' saw you with some of the men. Come on! Let's get out of here!"

"But I am to marry Señor Croff! Juana whispered.

But he didn't pay any attention at all to that. And when Juana didn't budge, he lifted her in his arms and ran across the patio for a door he'd evidently left open for escape. Then a burst of voices halted him.

HE TURNED into the main building, to run down a hall. Juana kicked once or twice and beat at his chest with her fists, but not very hard, and when he didn't notice the blows any more than if they'd been given by the wind, she became quiet. He was so very strong and determined!

With his arms tightly about her, and the floor speeding under Jerry's silent boots, she closed her eyes blissfully. Jerr-ee, whom she loved—she was in his arms again!

But he had betrayed her. Last night he'd kissed Jill, not in a casual way, but so significantly that Juana's heart had gone out of her. Why should he come here to her rescue when Jill Latham was his sweetheart!

Her eyes flew open, and she struggled a little. Instantly he put her down. He was breathing hard.

"Quiet, Juana!" he warned. "There are servants all around. We've got to go easy an' quiet!"

"But Jerr-ee, why do you do thees—?"

And just then a *Mejicano* woman came around a corner. Her eyes bulged big as tortillas at sight of them, then her voice shrilled out in warning. She jerked around and fled.

"Quick!" Jerry snapped, seizing Juana's hand. "We'd better head down under this building to the cellar. We can't get out upstairs—they'll guard all the doors right away!"

Juana didn't hesitate now, but followed willingly. No matter if Jeel was his sweetheart, she'd follow him wherever he went! She picked up her skirts and ran through hall after hall, then down a flight of stairs into a strange, dark region of dismal rooms where the only light came from tiny holes pierced in the thick adobe and stone high overhead. In one room there were rows and rows of bottles on racks along the wall.

"Croff's wine cellar, I reckon," Jerry breathed. "There ought to be a big window level with the ground somewhere along here. I saw it before I came in after you. If that window is where I figure it is, we can slip out easy."

"But Jerr-ee, why deed you come?"

A sound behind startled them both. Juana froze, listening so hard she was afraid the thunder of her heart might vibrate right through the ceiling into the rooms overhead. But it was a false alarm, for nothing stirred.

Again Jerry ventured forward, with Juana timidly trailing him. As the minutes passed, a frown of worry began to crease his brows.

Presently he made a gesture of despair.

"It isn't here, Juana! I reckon I'm turned around—chances are it's on some other side of the building. But I'm not stopped yet. This place is full of old passageways an' secret doors, they say. Watch the walls closely!"

And then his voice broke out with excitement. "Here's a door. Looks like it hasn't been opened in years. Maybe it'll lead into some tunnel that'll take us outside!"

Juana followed his pointing finger, to glimpse a faint, square outline in the thick wall. It was dusty, the surface crumpling, but that it was a door of some sort was plainly evident. Jerry rushed forward eagerly to throw his weight against it.

When it didn't budge he drew off a little, and charged. His shoulders battered hard. But there was no stir, and sweat stood out in shiny drops on this face.

"This is goin' to be tough!" he muttered.

While Juana watched anxiously, he rushed again and again. Then slowly there was a faint movement, and with a grinding of adobe, stone and dirt, a thick section of the wall moved forward—just a little, but enough to reveal a definite spear of daylight beyond!

"Got it now!" Jerry gasped.

He shoved furiously, and the opening widened. But it bore back strongly until Juana thought of propping rocks in it as Jerry shoved it wider and wider. At last it was big enough for them to squeeze through. Jerry wriggled forward first, then Juana.

Now that escape was so near, she though of her mother's dress, and as she wormed through the opening she was very careful not to tear it.

Beyond the door she looked around wonderingly. This wasn't outside, as she'd hoped. But it was close to outside, for there was an opening fifty or sixty yards away, at the extreme end of the queerest room she'd ever seen.

The dirt floor sloped down and down until deep under the window it merged into a slimy, muddy mass that looked forbidding. The two side walls were of solid rock, as was part of the ceiling. The rest of the celing was a mass of timbers, evidently the supports of a wing of Croff's big hacienda.

"Jerr-ee, what ees thees? she asked. "And that mud under the window—eet looks bad!"

"It is bad!" Jerry said soberly. "There's no escape through here. That's quicksand, Juana! I reckon this is Croff's dungeon. He'd throw his prisoners in

(Continued on page 108)

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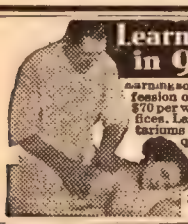

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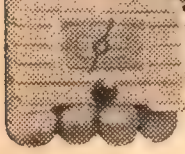

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(Continued from page 107)

here, and when they'd try to cross the quicksand to escape through that openin', they'd be sucked down!"

He turned away regretfully. "No chance to get over that!" he repeated. "We just got to get through the house, an' sneak out an upstairs door."

And just then the little rocks which held the door open crumpled under the weight against them. Before either Juana or Jerry could move, the heavy mass slipped back into place—and both knew, even when they rushed forward to work frantically at it, that the door couldn't be opened from this side of the wall.

There was no chance to budge it. No chance at all!

CHAPTER FIVE

Juana of the Long, Black Hair

WITH Juana's hand in his, Jerry led the way to the pool of quicksand. Longingly, Juana stared across the sinister, oily mass to the opening, to daylight and escape. So close, yet too far away over the quicksand!

Jerry went to the pool and stood there, very still and straight with dim light spilled over him.

"If I had a lass' rope. . . ." he muttered, half to himself, "I could drop a loop over that timber above the opening."

He didn't finish, but Juana knew he was thinking bitterly that he had no lariat. She took a step forward to be beside him, and her toe tripped against some light object. A rusty knife!

"Jerr—ee!" she said faintly.

He came to her instantly, to put his arms around her, and as always before she experienced the old sensation of heart battering against ribs, of breath coming as hard as if she'd been running. Then he kissed her, fiercely and longingly—so

intensely that she forgot last night and Jill.

Jill didn't matter now. All that mattered was he'd come to rescue her at the risk of his life—and the two of them would die together here in this lonely dungeon.

"Jerr-ee," she whispered.

"Juana, I—I do love you!"

They sat beside each other on the rim of the terrifying pool, and watched the daylight in the opening fade. Juana was almost happy. The emptiness inside her was gone, and again she had a heart! A heart full of love, so full of love, for Jerry Alder!

"Juana, I've got to tell you somethin' now!" Jerry said, in his low, intense voice, "It's—it's why I didn't come for you right away sweetheart. I—"

"Yes, Jerr-ee?' Juana breathed.

"That girl Jill—she's my sister. She's married to Tom Latham, a mining engineer who has been over the Border. She hadn't heard from him, an' was worryin' herself sick. Then we got word he'd been taken by bandits an' held for ransom. His family's got money, so we paid the ransom to get him free."

"Yes, Jerr-ee?" Juana whispered.

"Sam Gordon knew the bandit leader an acted as go-between. To prevent treachery he ordered the bandits to bring Latham across the Border. He figured his fiesta would be the best place for a meeting. The bandits wouldn't be noticed in the crowd. Everything went off as Gordon planned, an' now Jill has Tom again. She's made him promise never to go over the Border from now on." He was silent a moment, then added, "Juana, Santos is mixed up with the bandits. Sort of a spy, I guess. He's a very bad man, Juana!"

So that was how Tio Santos had known he would find Jerry and Jill together at Señor Gordon's fiesta!

"I—I'm sorry I couldn't come for you at once, *querida.*" Jerry's arm tightened. "But I had to look out for my sister—"

"Eeet—eet ees all right, Jerr—ee. Everytheeng is all right. . . ."

THEN Juana stirred, new thoughts rushing through her mind. "You say, eef you had a rope, you could loop eet by the window and get across thees sand?"

"Sure. Even a short rope would do the trick. It'd be hard to land on that timber above the window openin', but I can do it."

"Then—perhaps you shall have a short rope, Jerr—ee!"

The opening had faded entirely now, and it was so dark in the dungeon! Juana didn't want to leave Jerry's arms, but she forced herself away from him by sheer determination.

A little way from him she dropped to her knees and felt around for the rusty knife which had frightened her. The handle, when she touched it, made her flesh crawl, but she held it firmly while she flipped her head until her long, beautiful hair all hung down before her face. And then, with short strokes that sometimes hurt, she hacked it off!

"What you doin'?" Jerry called.

Juana went back to him, her hands full of long, silken strands.

"Eet ees just that I have cut off my long hair, Jerr-ee! I tol' you that my mother taught me to braid? And I promised some day to braid you a lariat."

Then Jerry kissed her until she was breathless, after which he separated the strands by sense of touch and helped her with them.

When day showed through the opening, Jerry Alder had a lariat!

"Here goes!" he said, striding to the edge of the pool. "Let's see if my rodeo hand is still good."

Juana watched him breathlessly. Her fingers, sore from the intense labor over the lariat, gripped into her palms from anxiety. Jerry's face was sober as he

threw a couple of experimental loops that fell short, then swung the lariat in earnest. After several tries he hooked the timber and drew the hair-rope tight.

"That's it!" he called cheerfully. "You go across first, Juana. Just take a good grip on the rope, an' swing."

Then he looked at her—not at her, but at her head. She was suddenly horribly conscious of her straggly, hacked-off bob, and with feminine anxiety her fingers wentup to fumble with it. Jerry laughed.

"Juana, you had too much hair!" he declared. "Look at the trouble it get you into—Croff wouldn't have noticed you if you hadn't won that long-hair contest."

"But, Jerr-ee, eet was my hair that you yourself noticed first," Juana returned.

"It wasn't your hair. It was all of you. I'd have noticed you no matter how you looked, dearest. Come here and let me kiss you, my sweetheart!"

But he didn't kiss her lips; he buried his face in her straggly locks, while his breath came quick and hard for love of her. Sweetheart! He'd called her that—and now, as she gathered her full skirts about her and took hold on the rope, she knew there was no doubt of his love—no doubt at all. . . .

"Jump hard!" he called.

OFF her feet, with weight on her arms, she swung forward. The oily sand yawned beneath her, and one toe dragged the surface. For a horrible instant she was afraid she wasn't going to make it all the way across the pool, then she battered against the wall just under the opening. She released the rope and took a firm hold on the wall, while she threw the loose end of the lariat back to Jerry.

She watched him as he prepared to swing across. The rope had supported her, but would it hold him with his added weight? What if it parted right over the pool? But her hair was strong and her braid-work flawless, in spite of the speed with which she'd done it, so that an instant later Jerry was beside her. He helped her through the opening.

Jerry glanced warily around. "I've got horses cached in a gully about a quarter mile down here!" he whispered. "We'll head for them. I'm hopin' they've not been found. We'll go slow an' easy—guards will be around the hacienda."

There were indeed guards about, for as they crept forward, taking advantage of hiding places behind the sparse clumps of vegetation, they glimpsed two riders patroling the hacienda. Her breath cut short in alarm, Juana flattened into the sand while Jerry kept a thumb of the hammer of his gun. But the pair passed by.

They couldn't travel fast. They saw no more guards, but Jerry wasn't taking any chance he could help. So it was hours before they finally slipped into the arroyo where the horses were.

On the rim of the deep, brush-filled draw, Jerry peered intently down, seeking signs of ambush.

Presently Jerry muttered, "They haven't found the horses, an' thanks for that! We'll lay low here until dark."

They slipped into the arroyo and fought their way through the brush to the horses. The horses—and three men!

A stranger—and Santos—and Señor Croff.

They burst from hiding when Jerry thrust his gun back in its holster and lifted his hands to fuss with the bit of one of the horses.

There was a pair of field-glasses dangling from Croff's neck, and now he called out in a thin, menacing voice: "From the top of my hacienda wall I can see everything within miles with these glasses, Alder. Nothing moves that I do not see when I watch. When we didn't find you last night, I simply sat on the wall and watched. When you headed this way, I thought of concealed horses, and I came here. We waited, not wanting to risk our

lives against your gun." Croff laughed.

Santos' wicked knife was in his hand, and now he came forward. He twitched Jerry's gun out and threw it in the brush.

"So! You weel run away with my leetle girl and cheat me out of my settlement! I weel keel you with thees knife!"

Croff lifted his gun and lined it on Jerry Alder's heart.

"I warned you, Alder!"

Jerry had backed off a little, dropping his lariat from a loop around his elbow into his hands. His cheeks had drained of color, but he stood straight and tall.

"You warned me!" he admitted, and apparently in his extreme nervousness he spun a small loop on the end of the lariat. His wrist flipped round, while he watched the blued muzzle that bored at him from Croff's hand. The loop circled faster and faster until speed made it blue.

"Sure, you warned me, Croff!" he continued, talking rapidly, "But you see, I love Juana an' I didn't aim to see her married to any skunk like you!"

The spinning loop snaked forward to tighten on Croff's gun-hand. Jerry heaved sharply, and the Colt flew out of Croff's fingers. In the instant before Santos could bring his knife into position to hurl, Jerry had snatched up Croff's gun and was pointing it toward Santos. Knife and sixgun spoke together—the one with a blast of sound, the other with a thin hum.

But the sixgun was first, and the hand that hurled the knife was unsteady because there was a slug in Santos' heart. He was dying when his arm flopped forward by instinct.

(*Concluded on page 112*)

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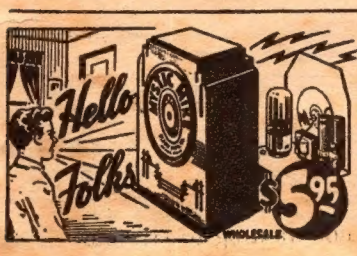

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"Jerr-ee!" Juana screamed.

From a shoulder holster Croff was dragging out a reserve weapon. It thundered once but his aim, like the aim of Santos, was no good—because he was dying from a slug in his heart.

Like light, Jerry swung on the other man.

"I—I didn't want no hand in this, Alder! I— Well, Croff hired me, an' I had to do what he says. But I ain't never been in favor of Juana marryin' him. . . ."

"Then throw down your gun, an' get out of here!" Jerry commanded.

When the man had scrambled off in obvious relief, Jerry loosed the two horses. He threw Juana into a saddle.

"Let's ride for it!" he called.

There was no pursuit. But before a mile had passed, Juana's horse went lame. Jerry rode alongside and lifted her out of the saddle into his arms.

After several more miles Jerry slowed up. With Juana warm in his arms, he rode on across the desert. Juana lay back, as in a cradle, and marveled how blue the sky was, how fresh the air, how soft the breeze. She lifted one slender finger and tapped it lightly on Jerry's nose.

"Jerr-ee, your nose—eet ees all burned by the sun!"

Jerry lifted her into a more convenient position and brought his head down so he could kiss her. Their mount, no longer urged, came to a halt and fell to cropping a bit of desert vegetation.

THE END

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Classified Advertising

(Continued)

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30x4.50-21	2.40	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	1.25
29x4.75-20	2.50	1.25
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.25
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.25
5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
6.00-17	3.40	1.40
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.40
31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
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REGULAR CORD TIRES
(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
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31x4	2.95	1.25	34x4½	3.45	1.45
32x4	2.95	1.25	30x5	3.65	1.65
33x4	2.95	1.25	33x5	3.75	1.75
34x4	3.25	1.35	35x5	3.95	1.75
32x4½	3.35	1.45			

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(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95	34x7	$10.95	$4.65
33x5	3.95	1.75	38x7	10.95	4.65
34x5	4.25	2.25	36x8	11.45	4.95
32x6	7.95	2.95	40x8	13.25	4.95
36x6	9.95	4.45			

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65	7.50-20	$ 6.95	$3.75
6.50-20	4.45	1.95	8.25-20	8.95	4.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95	9.00-20	10.95	5.65
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